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Faith in Action for Social Justice

DID JESUS PRAY TO ALLAH?

PLUS:

Watershed discipleship,
by Ched Myers

Conservatives vs.
the death penalty

Marching for justice in
North Carolina





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CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM tensions fill the news these days, with conflicts from Malaysia to the Central African Republic. Some of the disputes involve conflict over economic resources or political power; some are theological.

In this issue, we look at one of the controversial questions: Is it appropriate for Christians to use the word “Allah” to refer to God? Last year, the Malaysian government prohibited non-Muslims from using Allah, and a court ruling upholding that decision is now pending in the country’s Supreme Court. Miroslav Volf and Ryan McAnnally-Linz suggest that linguistically, historically,

and theologically, the differences between Christianity and Islam are *about* God, not *between* gods.

Jim Wallis looks at the Central African Republic, where disputes over political power have led to a moral crisis, with a violent Christian-based militia attacking Muslims and raising fears of ethnic cleansing. About 650,000 people—many of them Muslim—have so far been displaced; nearly 300,000 have left the country. But religious leaders are also playing a positive role, coming together to call for an end to the violence.



In the U.S., Eboo Patel writes, a growing number of colleges now offers courses in interfaith leadership. In our religiously diverse country and world, the skills needed to work positively with those of different faiths are increasingly needed.

In the final analysis, love of God and love of neighbor are fundamental tenets of both faiths. And the willingness to work together for the common good, sometimes courageously in the face of great risk, is something for which we can all give thanks. ■

Letters

SHIFTING FRAMEWORKS

Your March 2014 cover story “Reclaiming the Word,” by Terry LeBlanc, and photography choices are outstanding. LeBlanc offers us former and today’s missionaries so much to bend our brains and hearts with. His main theme of shifting from one framework to another (away from dualism and to the true biblical starting point) is solid theological and scriptural work. Thank you for getting us to know NAIITS, the North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies. What a resource!

Phil VanLinden
Tucson, Arizona

McGOVERN ON IRAQ

Here’s an anecdote sparked by Robert G. Duffett’s article “The Gospel According to George McGovern” (March 2014): When invited to a World Food Day dinner at a local college, I was anxious to hear one of my heroes, McGovern, who was the featured speaker. His talk was well-received and was followed by questions. I asked, considering his struggle against the Vietnam War, how he felt about the war in Iraq, then just beginning. Was there anything different about this war?

McGovern seemed to stand straighter and his warm eyes became more intense. “There are differences,” he said. “The Vietnam War was an unjust and totally destructive war fought in the jungle; the Iraq war is an unjust and totally destructive war fought in the desert.” He powerfully

“We got the opportunity to see someone take a moral stance.”

described how the American people had been lied to by their government and why he felt that this new war would be just as tragic. It was strongly worded and surprised most of those who were present. We got the opportunity to see someone take a moral stance.

Richard Mier
Martinsburg, West Virginia

DESCRIBING PAUL

I strongly object to Reta Halteman Finger’s use of “bipolar” to describe the apostle Paul (“Can Paul Be Redeemed?” February 2014). Bipolar, short for Bipolar Affective Disorder, is a medical term that should be restricted to use by medical providers of psychiatric care. It is a no-fault, severe, and persistent brain disorder that can destroy a person’s life. Although it is treatable, many individuals go untreated because of the stigma and discrimination associated with it.

Amy M. Randolph
Racine, Wisconsin

Reta Halteman Finger responds:

The word “bipolar” can be used in various ways. The dictionary definition I had in mind was “having or characterized by two opposed opinions, natures, etc.,” which seemed to apply well to the context.

Knowing persons who suffer from Bipolar Affective Disorder, I share Amy Randolph’s concern, but I don’t think people who use this term with another definition are necessarily insensitive or ignorant. Nevertheless, I will keep this in mind for the future.

SOMETHING IN COMMON

Ed Spivey Jr. and I have something in common. This discovery came about when I read his hilarious article “Donating My Body to Science” (February 2014) about the “vital study.” I have also been taking the same two pills (well, maybe not the same) for the past two years. And, he is wrong about the population being older white males—I don’t fit that description. Older, yes, and white—but not male! In fact, my pills come from Harvard Medical School’s affiliate, Brigham and Women’s Hospital. Hope we both end up “alive” at the end of the five years!

Sue Peterson
Orlando, Florida

“But what about...?” Write to letters@sojo.net or Letters, Sojourners, 3333 14th St. NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20010. Include your name, city, and state. Letters may be edited.

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BY JIM WALLIS

A Moral Crisis in Africa



FOR THE PAST year, life in the Central African Republic has been steadily spinning out of control.

Since the Seleka—or “alliance”—rebellion overturned the government in March 2013, there has been widespread insecurity and chaos. The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has called the situation a “mega-crisis.”

Though the rebel movement began as a coalition of 5,000 fighters from a few rebel groups, it is now thought to have increased to 20,000, and there are credible reports that as many as 6,000 youth have been recruited into violent movements. Since December, at least 2,000 people have been killed and more than 700,000 displaced. And now there are legitimate fears of ethnic and religious “cleansing.”

To say that this conflict is about religion is a simplistic narrative. Yes, right now people are banding

taken over the narrative, and it is the civilians—many families and children—who suffer.

As a Christian, I grieve over the unspeakable violence wrongly done in the name of faith by these men and women—on both sides. And I mourn with the thousands who have been driven from their homes, lost their lives, or felt compelled to take up arms out of fear.

But as I’ve learned from humanitarians on the ground dealing with the crisis, this is more complicated than a “Christian vs. Muslim” conflict. According to Thomas Paul Banze, Search for Common Ground’s country director in CAR, “The Central African crisis is, at its core, a political crisis at the national and regional level. The religious conflict remains a pseudo-conflict, a secondary conflict.” Banze continued, “In other words, it is the weakest of the issues at stake, but yet the most explosive. Religious leaders are doing their best to support their flocks and encourage forgiveness, but the political aspects remain unresolved.”

RELIGION HAS PLAYED two different roles in the conflict. After the instability and violence that rocked the country, faith offered a way for people to interpret their experiences and find comfort through biblical, Quranic, or other faith-based lenses. Unfortunately, it is very easy for scripture to be misused—with disastrous consequences. And it seems that in this highly charged and dangerous climate, violent actors are gathering under a Christian banner and claiming religious authority.

And in response, Muslim civilians are evacuating the country, a de facto ethnic cleansing. This displacement adds to the political and economic instability in the country as Muslim civilians play an important role in CAR’s economy.

The situation has the potential to become a humanitarian and political catastrophe in the northern part of the country, southern Chad, and along the border. And the conflict is creating an opportunity for further radicalization by regional opportunists and armed groups.

But religion is also playing a role in quelling the conflict. The head imam, the Catholic archbishop, and the head of the Protestant church in CAR have banded together in a show of unity to call for an end to the violence. These faith leaders are refusing to allow those perpetuating violence in the name of Islam or Christianity to represent their religions in this conflict. They are calling their flocks to seek the common good beyond religious divides and are working to keep fear and religious differences from changing the narrative from what they know to be true of their faiths and best values.

“The international community—including the faith community—failed to heed the repeated warning signs of a civilian protection crisis of epic proportions in the Central African Republic,” explained Diane Randall, executive secretary of the Friends Committee on National Legislation, one of the groups spearheading advocacy efforts here in the U.S. “It must not hesitate any longer.”

This conflict will not be solved solely by faith leaders calling for peace, since it is not just about religion. Instead, it will require a commitment on the part of international groups who can bring stability to the region and restore order. And it will require all of the actors involved to look beyond the convenient narratives to the harder work of sorting out a lasting peace. ■

Jim Wallis is editor-in-chief of Sojourners magazine.

As a Christian, I grieve over the unspeakable violence wrongly done in the name of faith.

together with others who are like them—Christians with Christians and Muslims with Muslims. But for more than 50 years prior to the conflict, Christians and Muslims in the Central African Republic (CAR) coexisted in relative peace. From the beginning of the conflict, there were political and regional forces at work, and the Seleka forces happen to be primarily Muslim. And in retaliation for the violence and fear that came with the rebellion and the mostly untrained and loosely organized rebel fighters, fighters who happened to be Christian formed the anti-Balaka (“anti-machete”) militias. These fighters, most would agree, are not the best representatives of either faith, but they have

Dai Kurokawa/EPA



'A Crime Against Humanity'

Kenyan supporters of the LGBT community wore masks to protect their identity in a February protest in Nairobi against Uganda's anti-gay bill. The bill, which states that the "offense of homosexuality" carries with it "imprisonment for life," was signed into law by President Museveni on Feb. 24. U.S. anti-gay activist and pastor Scott Lively, implicated in framing the Ugandan law and currently running for Massachusetts governor, has been charged by a Ugandan human rights group with crimes against humanity.

By Cardinal Theodore McCarrick

A New Relationship with Iran

How an agreement on nuclear weapons can build a bridge to peace.

DEALING WITH IRAN is complex for many reasons. This is not a made-up country whose borders were dictated by politicians in the last century; it is Persia—the great empire that fought with Greece before the beginning of the Christian era, the Asiatic power that imperial Rome was never totally able to subdue. From that long history emerged a people with a deep sense of proud history and a realization of national sovereignty that helps guide the destiny of the nation and its peoples.

I recall a conversation years ago with then-Iranian President Mohammad Khatami about nuclear power. He was not in favor of creating weapons of mass destruction, but he clearly promoted Iran's right to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. To deny this right is an affront to national sovereignty, he argued.

After the unfortunate history of the past government, once again Iran is governed by a president and a cabinet that call for peaceful

nuclear development and for a new and more open relationship with the West. This is the fact that has emerged into a clear interim agreement between the so-called P5+1—the members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany—and Iran. As reported, the goal of ongoing negotiations is to open the door

It is always better to talk than to fight, to understand others rather than to dismiss them.

to a 24/7 inspection of nuclear facilities and other guarantees to ensure that Iran will not make nuclear weapons.

The fact that the new president and his foreign minister are talking with the United Nations, and with Western leaders in particular, gives the world a better check on the nuclear ambitions of Iran than we have on any other nation in the region that stretches from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean.

If in the terrible, and most unlikely, event that a government of Iran should change its position and decide to build a nuclear weapon, the world would know almost immediately because of the security and surveillance that are likely to be part of a permanent agreement. In such an eventuality, it would be

possible to reinstitute the former sanctions or even impose more stringent ones.

All this is in the nature of diplomacy, but there is, for people of faith, a much stronger element that seems to be ignored or given only slight attention by the powerful nations in question—the singular and important factor of the fatwa of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran. In this fatwa, issued some years ago and confirmed several

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times by the Ayatollah, he made it clear that the teachings of Islam forbade the development and use of nuclear weapons. In the present understanding of religion in international affairs, there will be those who scoff at this teaching and deny that it would have extraordinary authority among the religious people of Iran. Many of us who have studied the fatwa and the present authority structure of Islam tend to be convinced that in the Islamic Republic, the fatwa of the supreme leader holds greater authority than any political decision. This clear inhibition of the use of nuclear weapons, based in the authority of the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet, is for many of us the strongest reason to believe that Iran is honestly trying to build up nuclear potential not for war but for peaceful enterprises.

Certainly many of us feel that it is most important that our nation has an opportunity to renew a relationship with Iran, the powerful and historic state that so influenced the history of the Middle East.

By Heather Beaudoin

A Turning Tide

A growing number of conservative Christians have joined the movement to abolish capital punishment.

I WORK ON the frontlines of the movement to end the death penalty in the United States. I grew up in a conservative evangelical home and my faith has led me to this work. In 2008, I had the opportunity to hear stories from murder victims' family members, death row exonorees, and corrections officials who participated in executions—all of whom believe the death penalty should be abolished. At that point I felt called to do this work and to begin engaging with other evangelicals.

I will confess, it was a lonely job when I started. I wondered who else would join me. So you can imagine my excitement at seeing what has today become a nationwide chorus of Christian voices questioning capital punishment.

A recent poll by the Barna Group showed a majority of Christians in the United States now oppose capital punishment and that young Christians oppose it by a large majority. More than two dozen evangelical leaders from around the country and across

For all these reasons, I believe that we should begin to improve our relationships with Iran even further and that through a newly developed relationship, more good things can happen in favor of more religious liberty in that country and a multiplication of connections—educational, religious and strategic—between our two peoples.

Building bridges between the United States and Iran will help bring peace and security in that volatile region. It is always better to talk than to fight, to understand others rather than to dismiss them without trying to appreciate their point of view. This is true in human relations, and even in relations between different churches and denominations. I truly believe it is a road on which God wants us all to walk. ■

Cardinal Theodore McCarrick is the archbishop emeritus of Washington, D.C. He is a former chair of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on International Policy, and has made several trips to Iran.

the political spectrum recently made their voices heard by publicly requesting a new sentencing hearing, free of racial bias, for a Texas death row inmate. Even conservative political leaders are speaking out against the death penalty.

As one who has been in the trenches on this issue for years, I can confirm that Christian engagement is helping to transform the death penalty debate, and I can tell you that it is being driven by the same forces that moved me—faith and cold, hard facts.

Christians who have joined me in opposing the death penalty believe that God calls us to value all life, not just innocent life. But they have been shocked to learn that the system can put innocent lives on the line. The seemingly endless reports about wrongfully convicted people being freed from death row have given Christians a compelling reason to pause. People of faith are also concerned that the death penalty puts family members of murder victims through years of uncertainty

From the Archives

May-June 1976

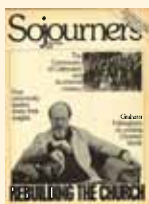
Advice to New Communities

TO PEOPLE interested in establishing a new community I would encourage them to see 1) who the leaders are, 2) what the purpose of the community is, and 3) what the commitment among them is. Many attempts at community fail because the reasons for living together are vague or “romantic.” I believe that where God’s people are gathered because that has been his word to them, there is a solid foundation on which to build.

Initially, most communities seem to face the same basic problems and struggles, ranging from eating habits to family life to priorities. When people come together committed to share openly, all of who they are eventually emerges. This, in turn, presents areas in the common life (like the ones mentioned above) that must be resolved.

The basic difference in the dynamics of a beginning community and one that is established and mature is the wisdom and experience that comes with the established community. The established community has gained knowledge in the forming of relationships and how to “grow people up.” Their trust in the Lord’s faithfulness is well established. Emerging communities would do well to vigorously pursue established communities—to visit them for periods of time and have members of established communities stay with them—whatever needs to be done to develop a trusting, learning relationship. ■

Margo Farra was an elder at Community of Celebration in Woodland Park, Colo., when this article appeared.



and never-ending media attention.

Today you can find Republicans sponsoring legislation to repeal the death penalty

our faith has taught us, and by taking a consistent pro-life stance, Christians are making real contributions toward ending use of the

God calls on us to value all life, not just innocent life.

in Kentucky, South Dakota (an evangelical pastor), New Hampshire, and Nebraska. In addition to me, there are evangelicals in anti-death penalty leadership positions in Kansas, Nebraska, Tennessee, and Texas.

From my perspective, as one who has stood in the wilderness, the tide is turning on the death penalty. By putting our beliefs and our values into action, by going back to what

death penalty in our country. In fact, if the trend continues, I believe Christians will be the deciding factor. ■

Heather Beaudoin, who helped create Montana Conservatives Concerned About the Death Penalty, is a national advocacy coordinator for Conservatives Concerned About the Death Penalty, a project of EJUSA.

By Gregg Brekke

A Wish List for the 1 Percent

The Trans-Pacific Partnership would grant new powers to multinational corporations.

THE TRANS-PACIFIC Partnership may be the largest free trade agreement you’ve never heard of. Or if you have heard of the TPP, it’s likely due to media reports about efforts by President Obama to fast-track the agreement through legislative hurdles. Still, details of the agreement and its secret negotiation process are sparse. Were it not for released drafts of the document and sub-chapters made available by the whistle-blowing site WikiLeaks, it is likely the general public would know little to nothing of the accord.

Building on the foundation of a 2006 economic partnership agreement adopted to encourage trade between Brunei, Chile, New Zealand, and Singapore, the TPP’s expansion of the agreement grows the number of participant nations to 12, adding Australia, Canada, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Peru, Vietnam, and the United States. The combined economic force of these nations would dominate global trade, representing roughly \$28 trillion—nearly 40 percent—of the world’s gross domestic product.

But the magnitude of this trading pool isn’t what concerns most critics of the TPP. What is more troubling to labor, environmental, and health groups are the powers seemingly granted to multinational corporations by the agreement and the unilateral easing of climate change laws that serve to

restrain industrial nations from disproportionate consumption and pollution.

Expanded corporate powers are nothing new for international trade agreements. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) gave rise to a legal quagmire that has allowed Exxon Mobil to challenge Canadian offshore drilling regulations, Dow Chemical to bypass local guidelines to expand pesticide production and waste disposal in Mexico, and Eli Lilly to enforce U.S.-issued drug patents and prices outside the country. Previously, under World Trade Organization treaty guidelines, a corporate entity needed to persuade its host country to challenge the trade laws of another. Corporations could not directly litigate against a sovereign nation or its policies.

Unlike the legal and economic provisions of the TPP, most of the environmental measures in the draft agreement released by WikiLeaks in January are voluntary and lack the power to enforce penalties for violators. Attempts to provide more robust language and consequences for climate change violations have been strongly opposed by the U.S. and Australia.

While members of Congress who provide oversight of international trade have been denied access to the negotiations, an estimated 600 corporate lobbyists are busy

working on the details. This has led MIT professor and activist Noam Chomsky to express what many opponents of the TPP feel is at the root of the agreement: maximizing corporate profit and increasing competition for low-wage work.

"It's called free trade, but that's just a joke," Chomsky said in a January Huffington Post Live interview. "These are extreme, highly protectionist measures designed to undermine freedom of trade. In fact, much of what's leaked about the TPP indicates that it's not about trade at all, it's about investor rights."

To paraphrase an often-heard slogan in economic justice circles, "trade agreements are moral documents." The morality of the TPP means that people will suffer as countries compete to offer the lowest price per unit, devaluing the true price of production and forcing more people into working poverty. The morality of the TPP means the earth will suffer as corporations sue nations

600 corporate lobbyists are busy working on the details.

that will not acquiesce to their demands for unregulated dumping. The morality of the TPP means that thousands of HIV-infected persons will die as U.S. drug companies enforce patents and prices for antiretroviral drugs that people in developing countries can't afford.

"No more NAFTAs," was a chant heard across the country in January as protesters gathered in 50 cities to oppose the TPP. Labor union representatives, educators, environmentalists, AIDS activists, migrant justice groups, and local trade associations have seen the destabilizing effects of NAFTA and can only imagine what an expanded free trade agreement might mean.

And nobody will know until the shroud of secrecy that has enveloped these negotiations is lifted. It's time for public transparency and oversight of the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement. ■

Greg Brekke is founder of SixView Studios (sixview.com) and president of the Associated Church Press.

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Protecting the Innocent

AN UNQUENCHABLE demand for sex, coupled with an endless supply of vulnerable children, creates a seemingly endless cycle of child exploitation.

During the Vietnam War, the U.S. Department of Defense contracted with the Thai government to provide “recreation and relaxation” for U.S. soldiers. Sex tourism was organized and expanded into a major industry. Today, sex tourism is a huge source of income for Thailand: The country remains a hub for tourists who can get anything they want at a very low price. Many children are trafficked into Thailand from surrounding countries or are fleeing military genocide. Others are pressured by their own family members to contribute to the household income. Uneducated and hopeless, these desperately poor boys and girls help feed the sex trade indus-

whose lush landscape and laughing children belie the harsh reality: Generations of women from this village have been and continue to be exploited by Thailand’s sex trade.

Young men in desperately poor families such as those in Chiang Rai can bring honor to their families by becoming monks, but girls are expected to provide financially. Traffickers understand this vulnerability, prey on it, and easily lure girls into life in the brothel.

As Rachel and her colleagues at The SOLD Project gathered stories from women and girls who’d been rescued from the sex trade, they became increasingly convinced

that they needed to work backward—to address the underlying issues that made children vulnerable. While SOLD

does partner with rescue and after-care programs, the main focus of its work is prevention: providing scholarships so kids can stay in school, matching mentors from local universities who provide personal relationships of love and accountability, offering awareness-training regarding the true personal cost of human trafficking, and building resource centers that provide safe places for children to access books and art supplies during after-school and weekend hours.

A GIRL I’LL call Jasmine was offered \$1,000 “to lose her virginity.” It’s a common offer that girls usually accept, thereby taking their first step into a life in the sex trade. But Jasmine refused. Why?



A SOLD Project student studying English.

The SOLD Project

Because as a student in the SOLD program, she was learning—from teachers and schoolbooks, from after-school arts, and from mentors—the power of dreaming, and her dreams did not include standing on a street selling her body.

As she traveled through Thailand, my friend Jennifer felt as if she were “staring into a dark hole, seeing no path to a solution.” But then she met hundreds of girls like Jasmine, girls destined by their culture for the sex trade—who now talk about being teachers and nurses and know they can actually do it.

Years ago I wrote in this column that I believe everyone should do something about human trafficking. Today, I write that again. I’m glad that there is greater coverage of the sexual exploitation of children. But has it led to greater action? Are you committed to helping end human trafficking? With a small investment, you can help a playful little girl keep her innocence and begin to dream good dreams. ■



Lynne Hybels, co-founder of Willow Creek Community Church in Illinois, is author of *Nice Girls Don’t Change the World*. Find out more about how to help end human trafficking at thesoldproject.com.

These desperately poor children are sacrificed to the sex trade’s insatiable hunger.

try’s insatiable hunger for children.

A friend of mine recently traveled to Thailand. “I’d read books and watched documentaries about the sex industry in Thailand,” says Jennifer Laine VanBeek. “But nothing prepared me for Bangkok. Even beyond the red light districts, the sex trade is impossible to ignore. I was defeated by the sheer volume, the visible presence, the young ages of the exploited girls and boys, and how engrained it seemed to be in Thai culture.”

Jennifer visited Thailand—often called “Disneyland for Pedophiles”—with her Westmont College friend Rachel Goble, president of The SOLD Project, an organization that works to prevent child exploitation. Early in 2008, Rachel moved to Thailand’s Chiang Rai region,

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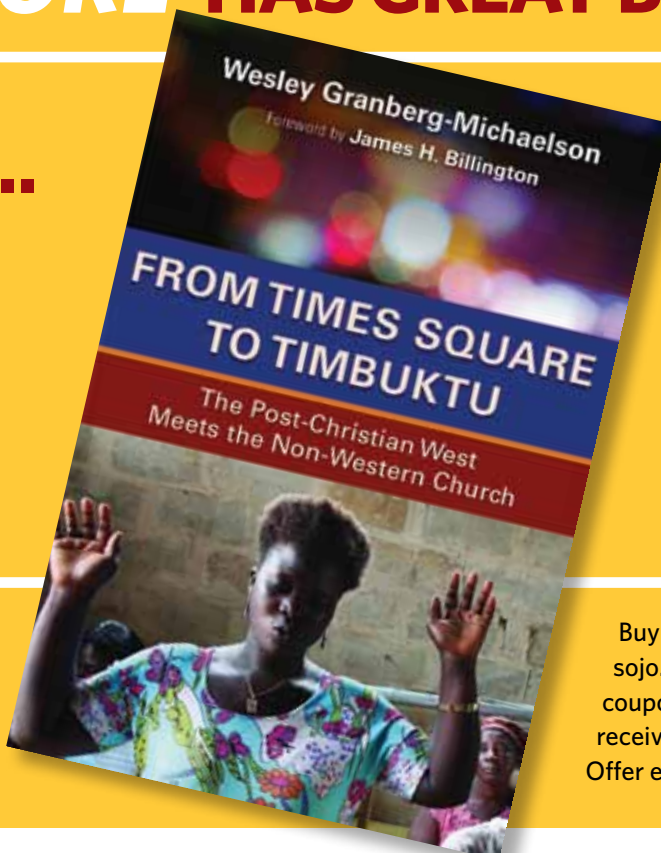
by Wesley Granberg-Michaelson

The heart of Christmas is not in the North Pole. It's in Timbuktu.

Fact: By 2010, Christianity's statistical center had moved to a point near Timbuktu, Mali.

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Studying Interfaith Leadership

CAN YOU GO to school to become an interfaith leader? An increasing number of faculty, staff, and students on campuses believe the answer is “yes.”

Interfaith leadership courses are starting to crop up at colleges across the country. At New York University and Nazareth College, you can even get a minor in the area. The organization I lead, Interfaith Youth Core, recently organized a conference for university faculty interested in this area. We expected 30 people to show

up, and got nearly 120. This all suggests that this may be a field whose time has come. what religious groups is the intermarriage rate growing fastest, and what are the distinctive dynamics of such relationships? What types of political arrangements seem to foster positive interaction between faith communities, and what types are associated with interreligious tension? How effective are current religious education programs in forming young people in faith traditions?

While interfaith studies is shaping up to be a scholarly field (a study group was recently formalized at the American Academy of Religion) with traditional academic modes of inquiry, interfaith leadership is an area of practice with a normative agenda. That’s scholar-speak that basically boils down to this: Interfaith studies remains a bit detached, while interfaith leadership has goals for the world. This means that an interfaith leader is not just asking scholarly questions of a religiously diverse world, s/he is learning how to design and run programs that can actually help people with different religious identities work together better.

What kind of coursework will interfaith studies/leadership programs likely have? Clearly, religious studies and theology would be a part

of this. You ought to know something about Islam and Buddhism if you want to work with Muslims and Buddhists. But—like education, public health, and environmental studies—interfaith studies is very much going to be an interdisciplinary field. The research methodologies of the social sciences, the case-studies approach from business schools, and the recent findings from cognitive science regarding how our brains are wired for certain types of belonging—all have a significant contributions to make.

Will an interfaith studies minor help you get a job? It will certainly help you at places such as Interfaith Youth Core! As our society grows more religiously diverse, the ability to work positively and proactively with people who orient around religion differently will be an increasingly sought-after set of skills, especially as religious conflict and tension continue to be defining themes in global affairs. I see hospitals, social service agencies, YM/YWCAs, schools, international development agencies, companies, and cities looking to hire these interfaith leaders. ■



Eboo Patel, founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, writes about social justice from his perspective as a Muslim American of Indian heritage.

This may be a field whose time has come.

up, and got nearly 120. This all suggests that this may be a field whose time has come.

Academically speaking, “interfaith leadership” is part of the larger field of “interfaith studies.” Just as you might study education at a university to become a teacher, in the future you will be able to take coursework in interfaith studies in preparation for a career in interfaith leadership.

Interfaith studies looks at the myriad ways that people who orient around religion differently interact with one another and considers the implications of that interaction for everything from personal lives to global politics. It’s a field that asks questions such as: In



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Faith in Action for Social Justice

DID JESUS PRAY TO ALLAH?

Several nations have recently banned non-Muslims from using Arabic words, including “Allah” for God. Does it matter?

IS IT WRONG for a Christian to pray to Allah? When a Muslim worships Allah, is she worshipping God?

Questions like these have arisen with more urgency than usual in the months since a Malaysian lower court ruled in October that the word “Allah” was exclusive to Muslims and therefore the *Herald*, a Malay Catholic newspaper, could not use the word “Allah” in print. (The decision is currently under appeal.)

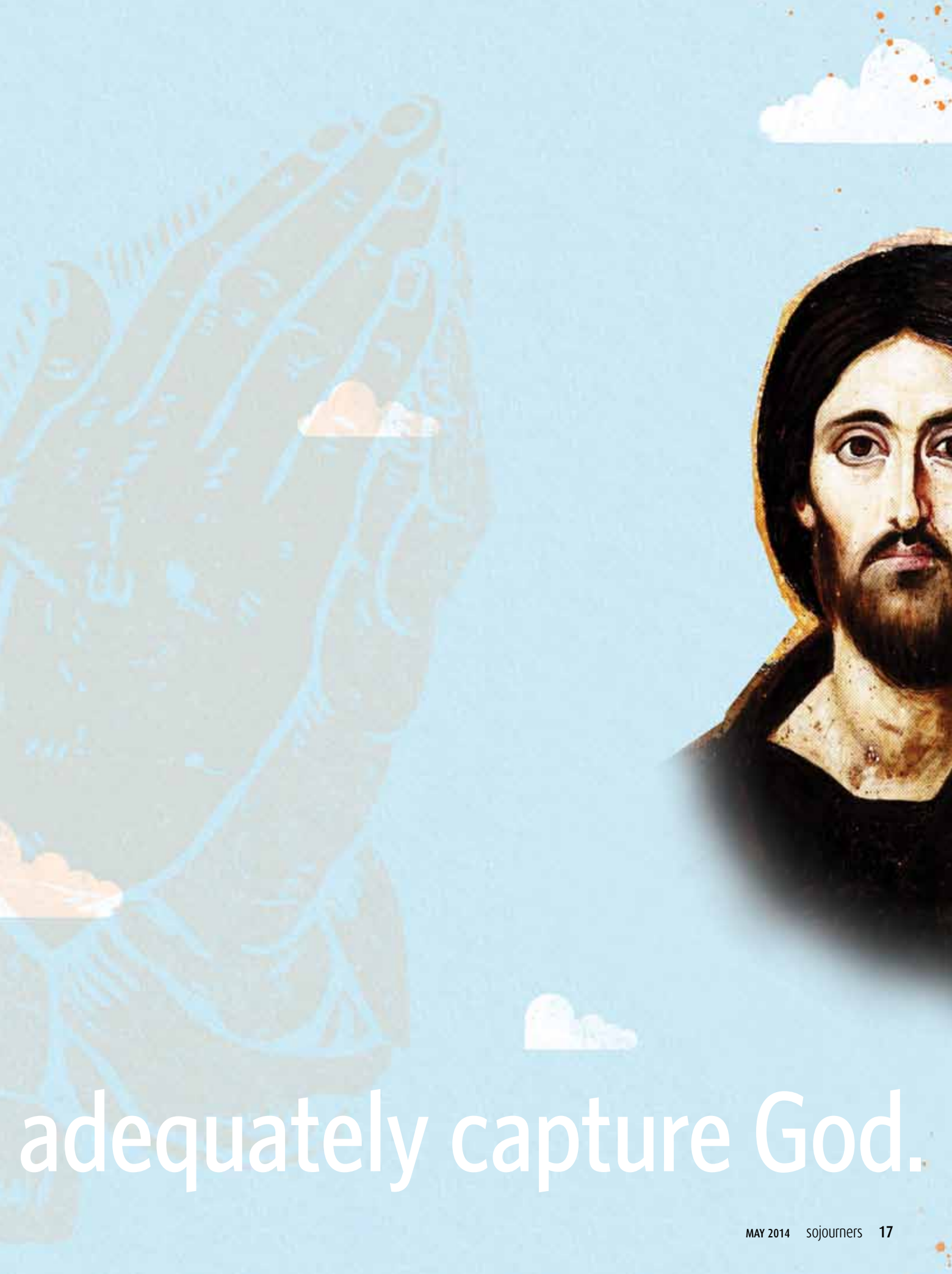
Many Christians lament the lower court’s decision. They see it as an infringement on the rights of religious minorities. But other Christians welcome the ruling. They claim that it actually *helps* Malaysian Christians by protecting them from confusion and preventing them from making a grave mistake.

For example, Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary here in the U.S., has argued that Christians should not call upon the God of the Bible using the word “Allah,” because “Allah” refers only to the god of the Quran, a god who is radically different from the true God of Jesus Christ.

Whether Mohler and those who agree with him are right carries dramatic implications. If they are, then prospects for respectful, trusting cooperation between Christians and Muslims are slim. There is one and only one God. If Christians believe that Muslims do not worship that God, then we must believe that Muslims worship nothing, an empty, created idol, or else something demonic. The claim to worship the one and only God

Illustration by Ken Davis

No human language can



adequately capture God.

is one of the most central claims of Islam. No matter how respectfully a Christian denied that claim, it would be difficult for most Muslims to receive that rejection. Mutual respect is an important ingredient in public cooperation. Thus cooperation between Christians and Muslims would be impeded. Even more disconcertingly, if the bulk of Christians held, as some do now, that Muslims actually worship a demonic force, then those Christians would have compelling reasons not to cooperate with Muslims. To do so would be to cooperate in opposition to God.

AS CHRISTIANS WE are called to follow the truth, regardless of the consequences to ourselves. Indeed, since Jesus is the “truth” (John 14:6), to deny the truth is to deny Christ. Knowingly accepting a falsehood for the sake of pleasant social outcomes is not an option.

Thankfully Mohler and those who agree with him are wrong about Allah. Not only should Christians feel free to use the word “Allah” in their worship of God if it’s natural to do so in their language, but Muslim speech about and worship of “Allah” is not, by definition, worship of a “false god.” But how do we know this?

1. The first thing to say is that no human language can adequately capture God. No words can refer to God in any straightforward way because God is so far beyond creatures like us. All of our conceptions of God fall short. But we often worship these ideas about God *in place of* God and fall into idolatry ourselves. All our words about the one who dwells in unapproachable light are inadequate. It is only by God’s grace that our thoughts and language are ever truly worship. This constant risk should give us a stance of humility when talking about a subject like this one.

2. Regarding Christians using the word “Allah,” it is important to recognize that Christianity has always been a fundamentally translatable faith. On the first Pentecost

(Acts 2), the believers speaking in tongues (including Arabic, see verse 11) illustrate this feature of Christianity. So does the fact that the New Testament books use common Greek words to translate Aramaic and Hebrew words referring to God. And the English word “God” comes from an Old English word used long before Anglo-Saxons started converting to Christianity. So using generic words for “god” from local languages is just how Christians talk about God. If “Allah” is one such word, then Christians ought to feel free to use it.

3. As it turns out, “Allah” is just such a word. It is related to the Aramaic word that Jesus uses for God in Matthew 27:46 when he said “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and would have used frequently throughout his life. If you want to translate the Greek *ho theos* (literally “the God”) found in John 20:28, Matthew 1:23, and elsewhere, there is no good option in Arabic other than “Allah.” Unsurprisingly then, we have evidence that Arabic-speaking Christians have used “Allah” in their worship and scriptures since at least the 9th century. It’s even possible that they did so before the time of Muhammad (570-632 C.E.).

4. However, it is only prudent for Christians to pray to and worship “Allah” if the meanings associated with that word are not radically opposed to what Christians say about God. After all, early Christians didn’t call God “Apollo” or “muse.”

Some Christians think that “Allah” doesn’t pass this test. They claim that the “Allah” whom Muslims worship simply cannot be the God of Jesus because the meanings of the word are just too different from what English-speaking Christians mean by “God” or Spanish-speaking Christians by “Dios.” Therefore, they conclude, Christians shouldn’t refer to God as “Allah.”

In this argument, they usually emphasize two points: 1) Muslims reject that Jesus was and is the incarnate son of God; and 2) Muslims deny the Trinity, that God is three in one.

We agree that these are two of the most important claims of Christian faith. Without them, Christians believe, one misses the decisive revelation of God and the very heart of who God is. Even so, just because someone denies these claims does not by itself mean that she doesn’t believe in and worship God.

Consider the vitally important case of Judaism. Incarnation and the Trinity are perhaps the two most significant differences in belief between Christians and Jews, and yet the vast majority of the Christian tradition has held that Jews believe in the same God as Christians.

For instance, one of the earliest heresies—Marcionism—was rejected by the church in part because it denied that Jews believed in the same God as Christians. More important, the gospel stories about Jesus show him assuming that the Jewish religious leaders he disagreed with believed in the same God that he proclaimed. When in John’s gospel Jesus debates those leaders over his status as “Son,” he does so assuming that he and they are talking about the same God whom Jesus claimed to reveal (John 5:18).

But Jesus’ assumption about common ground isn’t confined to his fellow Jews. In John 4:5-42, Jesus discusses with a Samaritan woman the right way to worship God. He assumes that he and she are talking about one God, even though he affirms the superiority of the Jewish understanding of that God: “You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews” (4:22). That the woman doesn’t know God as the Jews do doesn’t mean that she fails to worship God at all.

Following Jesus’ example, some early Christian thinkers extended a similar assumption to certain of the Greek philosophers. In his *Confessions*, Augustine spoke to God about books by Neoplatonist philosophers that he’d read earlier in his life. “The books say that before all times and above all times your only-begotten Son immutably abides eternal with you,” wrote Augustine.

Do Christians and Muslims agree

These same philosophers denied the incarnation, according to Augustine, and so missed the saving truth of the gospel. But nevertheless, Augustine thought their books really talked about God. The disagreement is about what Jesus revealed about God and how God is related to Jesus.

IN ALL OF these examples, the debaters were monotheists. They believed that there is one and only one God. At a minimum, they would agree with one or another version of three claims that are central to Christian faith:

- There is only one true God. Any other supposed “god” is no god at all.
- God created everything that is not God.
- God is different from everything that is not God. The cosmos is not God.

Importantly, claims very much like these can be found in the Quran. For example:

- “Know, therefore, that there is no god but God” (Muhammad 47:19).
- “It was He who created the heavens and the earth in all truth” (Al-An’am 6:73).
- Allah is “the Merciful One who sits enthroned on high,” which is usually taken to mean that God is beyond the created world (Al-Baqara 2:255).

Consequently, there is good reason to treat Muslim beliefs in and claims about Allah in the same way Jesus treated Jewish and Samaritan beliefs and Augustine treated the Neoplatonists. We may disagree about immensely important things about God, but we are disagreeing about God, not between gods, so to speak.

THAT IS ALL well and good, you might think, but isn’t the character of “Allah” in the Quran and Islam radically different from the character of God as revealed by Jesus? Monotheism aside, isn’t it just misleading to treat them as the same in any practically important sense?

There is no way to answer an objection

like this definitively, but we think that there are good reasons for rejecting this argument.

A common stereotype about Christianity and Islam goes something like this: The Christian God is loving and merciful, but Muslims believe that Allah is demanding and punitive. This stereotype is mistaken on multiple counts. A robust picture of God as portrayed in the New Testament must include the recognition that God is just (for example, Romans 3:5), makes demands of us (John 15:10), and is unwavering in judgment against sin (2 Peter 2:4-9). In the Quran God is praised as “The Merciful,” “The Compassionate,” “The All-Forgiving,” “The Generous,” “The Benevolent,” and “The Loving.”

There are—we emphasize this—crucial differences between how Christians and Muslims understand God’s character. (For example, Christians emphasize that God loves unconditionally.) But those differences do not erase the commonalities.

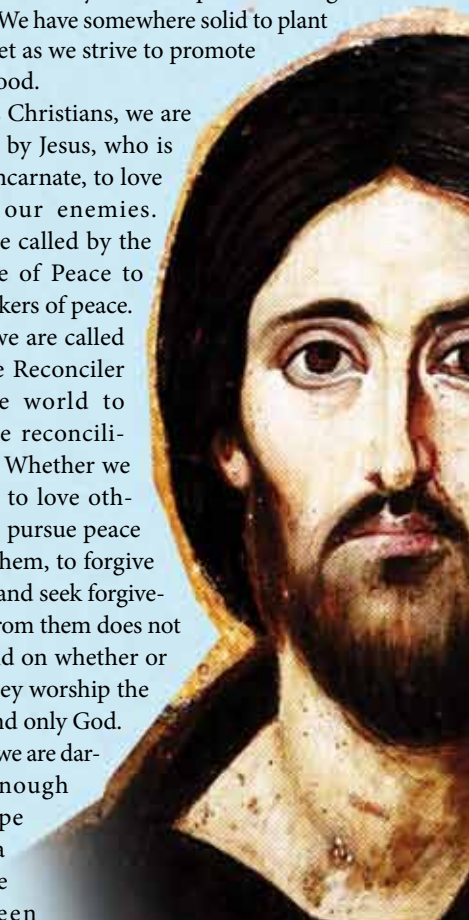
Overlaps also exist between the commands that Christianity and Islam believe God makes on human beings. The important document “A Common Word Between Us and You,” issued by many of the world’s leading Muslim scholars and clerics in 2007, points out that love of God and love of neighbor—the commandments on which Jesus says “the law and the prophets hang” (Matthew 22:40)—are central to Islam as well as to Christianity. And yet there are substantial differences. For instance, Jesus unequivocally commands that we love our enemies. Many Muslim thinkers and leaders insist that Muslims should be kind to all, but they tend not to include “enemies” among the “neighbors” whom they are commanded to love. But again, the differences do not erase the commonalities.

Exploring how Christians ought to relate to Allah leads us to see significant common ground between Christianity and Islam. This common ground does not mean that Christianity and Islam are the same faith. They are not. Nor does it mean that Christians and Muslims agree about

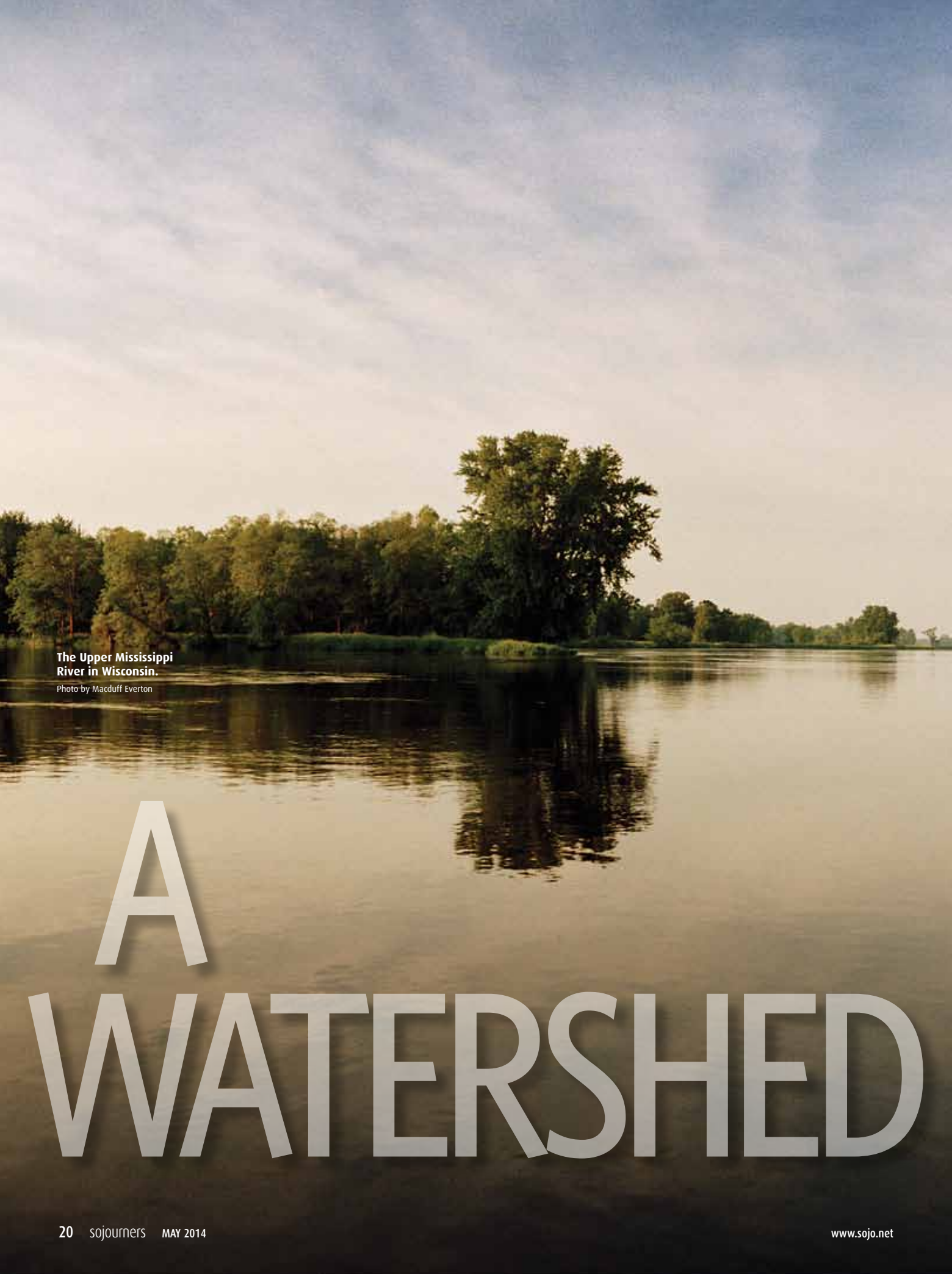
everything important. They do not. But it does mean that our visions for the common good are likely to overlap in meaningful ways. We have somewhere solid to plant our feet as we strive to promote that good.

As Christians, we are called by Jesus, who is love incarnate, to love even our enemies. We are called by the Prince of Peace to be seekers of peace. And we are called by the Reconciler of the world to pursue reconciliation. Whether we ought to love others, to pursue peace with them, to forgive them and seek forgiveness from them does not depend on whether or not they worship the one and only God. But if we are daring enough to hope for a peace between Christians and Muslims that includes cooperation in pursuit of the common good, then we should be happy to find that our common God provides a common ground from which to begin. ■

Ryan McAnnally-Linz is a doctoral student at Yale University. Miroslav Volf teaches at Yale University and is author of Allah: A Christian Response.



on everything? They do not.



**The Upper Mississippi
River in Wisconsin.**

Photo by Macduff Everton

A WATERSHED

**In the face of ecocide, the choice before us is stark:
discipleship or denial • by CHED MYERS**

OUR HISTORY IS increasingly hostage to a deep and broad ecological crisis. Stalking us for centuries, it is now upon us in the interlocking catastrophes of climate destruction, habitat degradation, species extinction, and resource exhaustion. Some call it “peak everything.”

“All we have to do to destroy the planet’s climate and biota and leave a ruined world to our children and grandchildren,” concluded environmental policy analyst James Gustave Speth in *The Bridge at the Edge of the World*, “is to keep doing exactly what we are doing today ... to release greenhouse gases ... impoverish ecosystems and release toxic chemicals at current rates, and the world in the latter part of this century won’t be fit to live in.”

Watershed discipleship invites
Christians to “re-inhabit”
that corner of creation in
which we reside.

MOMENT

Our Christian faith and practice now unfold either in light of or in spite of this crisis. Our choice is between discipleship and denial.

Two trends among thoughtful Catholics, evangelicals, and other Protestants in North America over the last quarter century are helping awaken us to “response-ability” in the face of these inconvenient truths. One is the spread of contextual theology, which demands both analysis and engagement with social realities around us. The other is how “creation care” has gained broad traction among churches.

But these trends need to be integrated. Contextual approaches have tended to address social, economic, and political issues apart from ecological ones. And environmental theologies are not contextual enough: often too abstract (debating “new

cosmologies”), focused on remote symptoms (tropical rain forests or polar ice caps), or merely cosmetic (“greening” congregations through light bulb changes while avoiding controversies such as the Keystone XL pipeline).

Our “all hands on deck” moment requires a practical approach that challenges and equips our churches to learn how to “serve and preserve” the earth (Genesis 2:15). The best way to do that is to focus on the particular places in which we dwell.

A quarter century ago, Kentucky farmer Wendell Berry argued that the question “is not how to care for the planet but how to care for each of the planet’s millions of human and natural neighborhoods, each of its millions of small pieces and parcels of land, each one of which is in some precious way different from all the others.”

But Berry recognized that our culture of displaced and displacing mobility has severed most of us from rootedness in a home place, even as it has colonized the homelands and destroyed the habitat of others. “Placelessness” is the primary form of First World alienation, Berry contends; we don’t stand against ecocidal policies because we have no place to stand.

The pathology of placelessness can only be healed by disciplines of “re-place-ment.”



The James River in Virginia.

Recovering Creatureliness

I BEGAN TO KNOW my watershed—the James River in Virginia—when I realized that recovering “creatureliness” is at the core of our discipleship. I learned that my life is utterly dependent upon relationships with countless others, including microscopic organisms in the soil. It’s this grand web of mutuality that forms our fundamental context. Watershed discipleship is contextual discipleship. If we seek to follow Jesus in context, nothing is more contextual than a watershed.

Participating in God’s action to restore the world requires us to have a place. Churches have the capacity to become communities of alternative economic and political practice, embodiment, and imagination. To become communities of justice and reconciliation, we need to embrace the simple disciplines of table fellowship, relationship to water, growing food, and ecological literacy. That’s the path of watershed discipleship. —Chris Grataski

Chris Grataski, founder of Wild Oak Ecological Design, is a permaculture educator and designer living in central Virginia.

Covenanting with specific land and nurturing relationships with a biotic community can challenge our dysfunctional theology of presumptive superiority. And embracing the long-term project of living sustainably somewhere can wean us off our addictive-compulsive quest for infinitude.

WE HAVE LOST our way as creatures of God’s biosphere, but the map woven into creation can lead us home. In *Boundaries of Home*, Doug Aberly contends that the old/new tradition of bioregionalism holds the key to our survival as a species. It also represents an opportunity for the next great renewal of the church—in light of, not in spite of, our ecological crisis.

Kirkpatrick Sale’s 1985 primer *Dwellers in the Land* defined bioregionalism this way:

... bio is from the Greek word for forms of life ... and region is from the Latin *regere*—territory to be ruled ... [Together they convey] a life-territory, a place defined by its life forms, its topography, and its biota, rather than by human dictates; a region governed by nature, not legislature. And if the concept initially strikes us as strange, that may perhaps only be a measure of how distant we have become from the wisdom it conveys.

WE CAN BE even more specific in re-mapping contextual theology and practice by focusing on what is most basic to life: how water flows.

John Wesley Powell, the first non-native person to raft successfully down the Colorado River, in the 1860s, gave the first modern definition of a watershed as “that area of land, a bounded hydrologic system, within which all living things are inextricably linked by their common water course and where, as humans settled, simple logic demanded that they become part of the community.”

The inviolable fact is, wherever we reside—city, suburb, or rural area—we are deeply intertwined within and dependent upon this “bounded hydrologic system.” Precipitation hits ridges and flows either into our watershed or a neighboring one and is drained by a local creek, river, or stream (even if buried under concrete). The area covered from the water’s origination in the hydrological cycle to its end point in a lake or sea represents a unique mix of habitats that

influence each other: forests and wetlands, fields and meadows, rivers and lakes, farms and towns. Each of us lives in a watershed, no matter how ignorant we may be about it.

The 2,110 watersheds in the continental U.S. come in all sizes. The Mississippi Basin is the third largest watershed in the world, draining 41 percent of the lower 48 states into the Gulf of Mexico. The Ventura River watershed where I live is a scant 227 square miles. A sub-watershed can be as small as your neighborhood.

Brock Dolman, a California permaculturist and co-founder of the Occidental Arts

save places we don't love; we can't love places we don't know; and we don't know places we haven't learned.

Watershed literacy was key to the survival and flourishing of all traditional societies. It remains so today.

"RE-PLACED" ECCLESIAL communities can make an enormous contribution to the wider struggle to reverse our ecological catastrophe—and can recover the soul of our tradition in the process. Watershed discipleship invites Christians to "re-inhabit" that corner of creation in which we reside

Watershed literacy was key to the survival and flourishing of all traditional societies. It remains so today.

and Ecology Center, argues that "watersheds underlie all human endeavors and form the foundation for all future aspirations and survival." Cupping his hands, he speaks about a cradle, or "basin of relations." Every living organism within this basin is interconnected and dependent on the health of the whole. This form of "local, intentional community," he says, "should embody the geographic scale of applied sustainability, which must be regenerative."

I BELIEVE THIS is the best paradigm for a contextual theology and practices of creation care, grounded in disciplines of "re-placement"—or, in other words, "watershed discipleship." In the education and organizing I do, it's become our framing slogan. And it's an intentional triple entendre.

First, it recognizes that we are amidst a watershed historical moment of crisis, which demands that environmental justice and sustainability be integral to everything we do as Christian disciples—and as citizen inhabitants of specific places.

Second, it acknowledges the inescapably bioregional locus of an incarnational following of Jesus: Our discipleship necessarily takes place in one or more watersheds.

And third, the phrase suggests that we need to be disciples not only *in* but also *of* our watersheds.

Our challenge today, to paraphrase a syllogism offered in 1968 by Senegalese environmentalist Baba Dioum, is this: We won't

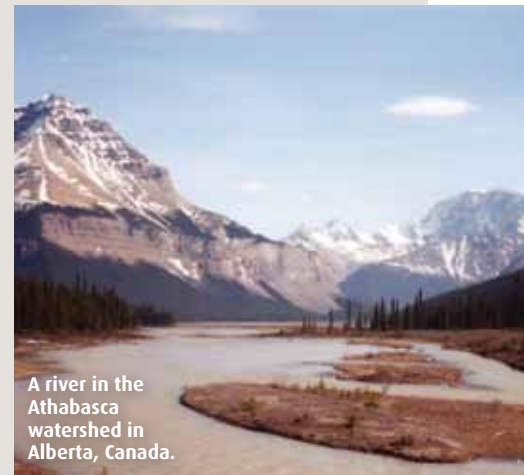
by apprehending and engaging everything within it in terms of ecological resiliency and social justice.

This approach can nurture several key renewals:

1. Theological re-grounding. A watershed paradigm recovers the heart of the biblical tradition while challenging dysfunctional characteristics of industrial civilization. It reasserts the priority of creation over all human ideological and hegemonic claims, recovers incarnation in the face of the placeless theological abstractions of modernity, and remembers that the people of God covenanted with specific land as caretakers of the divine gift.

At the beginning of the gospel, Jesus is baptized into the Jordan River watershed, following in the footsteps of the wilderness prophets; at the end of Revelation, the city is transfigured into a garden watered by the "River of Life." From Noah to the New Jerusalem, our tradition is about the redemption of the terrestrial.

2. Re-placed economics. By measures of both social justice and ecological sustainability, globalized capitalism isn't working. A watershed focus compels us to reckon with the abundance and limitations of what Wendell Berry calls the "Great Economy" of nature. The local food movement asks what can be harvested, produced, and consumed sustainably in a given bioregion. This logic



A river in the Athabasca watershed in Alberta, Canada.

An Enormous Sponge

I WORK FOR Kairos Canada, and we are trying to build in Canada and globally an ecumenical movement for transformative change in the areas of ecological justice and human rights. We particularly focus on the impacts of resource extraction on Indigenous communities.

For example, the Athabasca watershed is an enormous sponge that stretches north to the Arctic Ocean. Right in the middle of it is the Alberta tar sands, from which bitumen (a form of heavy oil) is extracted. We don't know what kind of destruction is being left behind, because we can't get verifiable, systematic, cumulative studies of the environmental impacts of this 40-year-old project.

What we do know is that traditional ways of life of the Indigenous peoples of the area have been disrupted. I've had elders tell me they can't eat the meat they hunt, because when they butcher the animal the interior organs look really strange. They could be gathering berries or fishing, but because they live in a watershed that's downstream from this incredible petrochemical industry, they're terrified to eat it. So they have to eat flown-in food that's alien to their culture, that's bad for them, and that they can't afford.

We have a responsibility to use the Earth's wealth relationally, not exploitatively. For us in Canada, watershed discipleship in the churches focuses on right relationship with the land and with Indigenous peoples. —Sara Stratton

Sara Stratton lives in the Humber-Don watershed in Toronto.

Wikimedia Commons

should be extended to every aspect of economic life, from resource extraction to waste disposal, emphasizing the local and avoiding the exotic.

3. Political imagination. Daniel Kemmis, former mayor of Missoula, Mont., argues in *Community and the Politics of Place* that public life can be transformed through a bio-regional approach. A “re-inhabitory politics” grounds civic culture and social planning in “the efforts of unlike people to live well in specific places.” Indeed, watershed mapping helps us reimagine “political space.” Our two-dimensional political maps enshrine problematic historical legacies of conquest and colonization, while their straight boundary lines are abstractions that alienate us from the real topography and hydrology that sustain us. Look at a recent watershed map of the U.S. How might political culture change if the basic unit of governance were

Watershed Protection

“nature rather than legislature”? Nor is this NIMBYism, since the ecological and social health of each watershed is connected with every other.

4. Social justice. Discipleship never allows us to escape from social issues such as race and class, as is too often the case with conservationist agendas. Every watershed bears the wounds of social disparity and exclusion, both historic and contemporary, which also must be mapped and transformed. In particular we need to learn, love, and help preserve the legacy of indigenous inhabitants on whose traditional lands we are guests. Central to a watershed ethos should be commitments to restorative justice for all those displaced in the past and marginalized in the present.

5. Ecclesial renewal. The ancient notion of church as parish—as placed community—still survives, if atrophied by market-driven church shopping and commuter mobility. Our spirituality, liturgy, and discipleship practices can and should both reflect our watershed and build literacy in it.

An ecological hermeneutic for reading scripture will help bring this task alive. For example, rituals such as baptism can be moved outside to a creek, lake, or

beach (or those waters can be brought into church).

Here in the Ventura River watershed in California, friends at the Abundant Table Farm Project are challenging Episcopalians to “localize the liturgy” by knowing where our bread, wine, candles, and tapestries come from, who made them, and under what conditions. Reconnecting our sacred symbols with their bioregional materiality stimulates conversations about food justice and local economy, and in turn renews our appreciation for those symbols. The church kitchen can become a venue for re-skilling around cooking and preserving local foods, as underutilized elders teach the older arts of home economics. Significant parts of the lawn or parking lot can be repurposed for community gardening, native plants cultivation, and permaculture classes. What an exciting future: Transition church as eco-village!

IN SO MANY ways, our churches are well situated to become centers for learning to love our places enough to defend and restore them. Christians have a deep culpability in the present crisis, but also ancient resources for the deep shifts needed. The watershed paradigm is radically contextual yet intrinsically universal, inviting us as church to let our resident landscapes shape our imagination and material habits. To this end we are building a North American alliance for watershed discipleship to build consciousness and nurture disciplines.

We are, says Brock Dolman, “perched on the tipping point of a watershed moment ... Now is the time to bring our communities together to set in motion plans and processes that ensure our watersheds will remain healthy in perpetuity. Your home basin of relations is your lifeboat.”

For biblical people, this image brings to mind Noah’s ark and gospel stories of disciples crossing “to the other side” (Mark 6:45). The crisis is now. Let us embark on our watershed arks, and follow Father Noah and Brother Jesus into the coming storm. ■

Ched Myers (ChedMyers.org) works with *Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries* in the Ventura River watershed of Southern California. You can find more on watershed discipleship at www.watersheddiscipleship.org.

A schematic of the College Creek watershed draining into the larger James River watershed in Virginia.



Do Fish Need My Ibuprofen?

I LIVE IN THE Lake Champlain watershed in Vermont. It’s important for me to think about water as belonging to God. It should not be privatized, bottled and sold, or polluted for private benefit. It should not be illegal to collect rain water; poor women should not have to walk great and dangerous distances to collect drinking water for their families.

As I have studied toxicology, I have learned that if I have a headache and choose to take ibuprofen, the fish in my watershed are also taking ibuprofen. In particular, I have been looking at what happens as plastics are made and what happens when we’re finished using them, as they wash out from landfills into the oceans, and as the byproducts of their combustion blow out of smokestacks from incinerators. I study the consequences of disposable culture on our water, and how that impacts both human and wildlife health. —**Sasha Adkins**

Sasha Adkins teaches environmental studies with a focus on plastic-related endocrine disruption.

Our Lady of the Watershed

OUR LADY QUEEN of Peace church sits atop a low bluff overlooking the Army Navy golf course. This vibrant Arlington, Va. Catholic community has a history of staring hopelessness in the eye and declaring, “Not on our standing ground!”

Queen of Peace was founded by African Americans in the midst of virulent segregation. In the 1940s, Arlington’s black Catholics had to travel two hours by buses to attend a Mass where they were welcome. There was a closer church, but black Catholics were relegated to the back pew and prevented from receiving communion before whites. In 1945, 16 families pooled their money, hired a black real estate agent, and purchased small parcels of adjoining property under various names so as to not arouse suspicion. In an era when redlining and “neighborhood covenants” protected white enclaves and economic power, this was a courageous act. A little less than two

climate, changing human activity is important in undoing the harm. And since the earth’s biosphere is made up of interlinked watershed communities, perhaps restoring our particular watershed is analogous to healing the earth at its “cellular” level, which would be a positive contribution.

One of our first exercises was to identify the church’s watershed. By accessing Arlington County’s GIS mapping, we learned the bluff on which the church sits was formed by a fall line between the hard rock of the Potomac Formation and softer Upland Terrace deposits. This geology influences how water flows and percolates. We knew that the largest regional water basin was the Chesapeake Bay—a watershed maintaining 17 million people. Next we narrowed it down to the watersheds of the Potomac, Four Mile Run, and finally Lower Long Branch, a watershed of about seven square miles

with 66,000 inhabitants. Still big, but manageable for a church to live its commandment to “till and keep” (Genesis 2:15), or “serve and preserve,” as Ched Myers translates it. We also discovered that two underground creeks hugged the property.

What would it look like for Queen of Peace church to engage in this kind of “watershed discipleship” as a means of caring for creation in context? Could the church’s evangelism team survey its watershed inhabitants to develop a demographic profile of strengths and needs—and invite neighbors to visit Queen of Peace? A committee could map the property’s impervious surfaces and tree canopy and

consider installing rain gardens to enhance groundwater retention. The food pantry volunteers might supplement their supplies from an organic church garden. The youth group could mark the storm water catchments with watershed labels.

The church could collect a symbolic amount of water from the head of the Potomac River to use when baptizing new members. There are thousands of ways for a church to serve its watershed and all life within it, practices that build ecological and spiritual resiliency. Small acts like these disciple us to our place so we can “exercise skilled mastery” (Genesis 1:28) within it, as biblical scholar Ellen F. Davis puts it.

Jesus was baptized into the Jordan River watershed and absorbed its ancient place-memory, hovered over by a brooding Spirit. Our churches retain this ancient memory, these old stories. But if the stories don’t take root in native soil, in our own standing ground, then they won’t have the power to save us. Like seed on rocky soil, they will wither before the enormity of environmental collapse.

Perhaps Our Lady Queen of Peace sits on a bluff for a reason. It is like someone who, “building a house, dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built” (Luke 6:48). A church, once again facing an apparently impossible endgame, hears God’s word and acts on it. ■

Rose Marie Berger, a Sojourners senior associate editor, is a Catholic peace activist and poet.



There are thousands of ways for a church to serve its watershed and all life within it.

acres—their standing ground—was purchased for \$14,000. The bishop blessed Queen of Peace, Arlington’s first black Catholic congregation, on Pentecost Sunday 1947.

Now, nearly 70 years later, this multicultural community is asking a new question: With global temperatures rising and changes visible everywhere in nature, how do we face the truth of climate change?

During a speaker series in March focused on “the integrity of creation,” I encouraged them to overlap the ecclesial concept of “parish” with the ecological one of “watershed.” For life to persist, there must be living water. Scientists tell us that each watershed, no matter how small, is responsive to climate change. Since human activity has destabilized the





Last June, 151 people were arrested as part of a Moral Monday protest in Raleigh, N.C. The demonstrators condemned assaults by Republican lawmakers on public education, voting rights, and anti-poverty programs.

'DON'T BE LEFT BEHIND NOW'

I got on a bus to help someone else's justice movement—and discovered it was my own.

On Feb. 8, tens of thousands of people gathered in the North Carolina capital city, Raleigh, for what organizers called the Moral March. It was a follow-up to last year's "Moral Monday" movement that started in April 2013 when Rev. William Barber II, president of the North Carolina NAACP, and 16 others were arrested inside the North Carolina legislature for protesting sweeping voting restrictions proposed by the Republican-controlled state government.

I ALMOST DIDN'T go to the Moral March. I kept looking for excuses. There was all that work to be done for next week. I told my professor I'd miss Friday's preaching class. I hoped she'd chide me and I'd feel guilty enough to stay. Instead she said, "Great, go with my blessing." I told my tutor I'd miss tutorial. She said, "I'm so glad you're going to the march."

Why couldn't I go to a normal graduate school where no one left their rooms? But instead I went to seminary, and to Union, of all places!

I said, God, I'm crazy to go. Mild laughter was the only response. I glared at my reflection in the dark window. The reflection raised her eyebrow and said, don't be left behind now.

The little voice in the window stayed with me as I put an extra pair of thick socks in my bag.

Don't be left behind, reading books about other

people's marches and other people's spiritual revelations and other people's religions. This march is historic, my reflection informed me. Go and be part of history. This is your history.

This is your time.

But a "this is someone else's march" voice also lingered as I boarded the bus. I'm from California, and we've got a whole 'nother set of complications that seem pretty distant from North Carolina.

As we traveled for hours through the relentless monotony of shopping malls into a world of cold bare trees and peeling white picket fences, I felt we were going into a state that had been left behind. The people I knew from the Carolinas (outside of progressive bubbles such as Chapel Hill) had been glad to leave their home state and forge their own path to freedom—somewhere else.

Was it our absence, of moving "ahead" without taking our brothers and our sisters with us, that now made it so that we needed to go "back" to North Carolina, to see what could be done about a state

This is your history. Go and be a part of it.

Chris Seward/newsobserver.com



Thousands gathered in Raleigh in February to protest North Carolina's budget cuts and other measures.

Getty Images

that had been “left behind” to the whims of hyper-conservative GOP leaders? The past year has seen voting rights rapidly eroded by a ridiculously wealthy minority, and health care and welfare stripped. The platforms that enable poor people to survive are under attack, and the few ladders out of poverty are being systematically broken and burned. Was I going into one of the vortices that mobility, globalization, and the idolizing of individual “freedom” have helped to create?

But once we got there, it felt more like it was we New Yorkers who were in danger of being left behind as the “voiceless” people of

a better place for me to make my name known? A better place to show my glory? Has the ground not been perfectly prepared for me to show what I can do?”

And it was as if a wind had captured those gathered in that hall and none could stay sitting. I’ve read the Bible. I know at least some of the ways God might make ready a people prepared for the Lord. I knew to what the good reverend was referring.

When we went to the march the next morning, we knew that we were going to be part of history. But how could we know what it means to look behind you on a cold, gray morning in February and see rows and

man who had started these marches against economic injustice and the demolition of voting rights, began to speak? I barely noticed him. He had such a staid, almost boring voice. But he kept saying things that you’d pay attention to simply because they were true. His speech gathered momentum slowly, carefully. The way one speaks if you want to make sure no one is left behind.

He went through the critiques that had been lobbed at us—when “I” became “us,” I can’t tell you—and dismantled them, one by one. As he did so, he brought us together, inviting us to this Welcome Table—gay and straight and Republican and all

those who refused to be identified by their identity and sought to be known by their light. He prayed and hollered like a proper preacher by the time he was done, and there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that this “moral march” was “moral” first and “march” second—or rather, that you can’t have the march without the morality.

In that moment, I knew with no doubt that the term “moral” was no longer the prerogative of the Religious Right. We had reclaimed it. Even though all I had done was sit on a bus for a few hours and been welcomed by church folks—one church feeding us spaghetti for dinner, another cheese grits for breakfast.

We all greeted our neighbors and people started leaving when Rev. Barber finished speaking. You know, like church. Sermon’s done. Time to get going.

Our bus back to New York was near the stage. As we made our way toward it, Barber started speaking again. Our banners were already folded. So when he said we should join hands with our neighbors, we were not distracted by slogans, and we could do so.

He invited us to sing. We all grasped arms, swayed, and sang, “We Shall Overcome,” the song that keeps bathing a feverish world in hope. As we sang, “we are not afraid,” the sun suddenly poked through the clouds. The warm light was so strong we couldn’t ignore it. And the reverend tossed out whatever he was going to say and simply said, the light—the light has come out!

In that moment I knew there was no “behind.” No one had been left behind. Not

We are taking the high road, where no one is left behind.

North Carolina spoke for themselves. This was no missionary journey to save the poor. It was we who were at risk of falling behind.

We walked into the middle of a pre-rally already underway. Bishop W. Darin Moore of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church was preaching. The Spirit was upon him so strong that the others on stage were walking and dancing and almost crying behind him, in black suits and cufflinks and high heels. His sermon covered human rights and poverty, how prophets rarely get profits, the importance of reaching out to Republicans, and the wisdom of his mother. But the phrase that grabbed me around the heart like a new lover was when he asked, “God, why North Carolina?” and God said to him, “Why not North Carolina? Is there

rows and rows of people, black and white, Asian and Latino, farm workers and eco-justice workers and civil rights activists, raging grannies and babies wearing shirts that said, “Forward together, not one step back”? How can you know what it is to hear a medical doctor and a rabbi and a Muslim brother and a Latina teenager all articulate with such eloquence the pains of poverty and inequality in North Carolina, and to hear in their stories your cousin and father and teachers and friends in California? You can’t know until you are there. Not even they can know such things until they are there, speaking to you, seeing the truth of what they say in you, standing there, watching you witnessing them.

And when Rev. William Barber, the

me, not North Carolina, not California, not New York, not the highest Himalayas, or the deserts of Death Valley. In this light, there was only the irruption of grace, in which there was no backward or forward. In such a moment, how could I stop the tears that glistened on my cheeks? And why would I?

We know who we are. We are whole. We are beloved. We are together. We are taking the high road, where no one is left behind.

The bus was quiet as we rolled out of Raleigh, which was once again covered in long shadows as the sun hid behind the clouds. Some of us were already planning a return to support plans for a 2014 Freedom Summer and an attempt to ensure that the poorest people in North Carolina had the IDs now necessary to vote. But in that moment, most of us were basking in the experience of having received a profound blessing.

North Carolina's Moral March was no longer someone else's movement. It was no longer the South's movement to hold onto voting rights.

We New Yorkers could only receive the blessing of being reunited within the body of our God when North Carolinians remembered how to stand together and extended their gracious hospitality to us, that we might stand with them. It was, I knew, an invitation that knew no time limit. "Together forever, not one step back"—the phrase circled in my mind like a little love song.

Did I misunderstand the slogan? I wondered. Wasn't it "forward together"? Maybe. Kairos is funny that way. We don't always remember "back" or "forward," "north" and "south," "self" and "other" when God's time overcomes our erroneous notions of divisions.

As night dawned, the reflection in the bus window returned, and with it that little laughter I had heard a scant 48 hours earlier. It would be late when I reached New York. But I would be right on time to continue traveling with those who keep seeing and seeking the Light—together. Forever. ■

Sara J. Wolcott, a student at Union Theological Seminary in New York, has worked with the Institute for Development Studies at the University of Sussex and in India.



Associated Press

Better Together

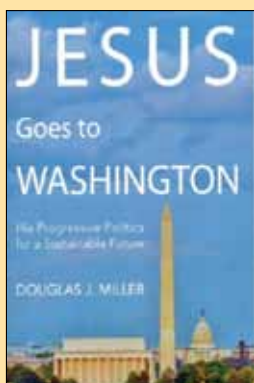
LIKE THE 2013 Moral Monday protests—which over the course of last spring and summer saw more than 900 people arrested for peaceful civil disobedience, February's Moral March was notable for the diversity of races, ages, causes, and faiths represented. This is the fruit of long-term coalition-building among progressive groups and individual activists sparked by Rev. William Barber in late 2006 that resulted in the formation of the Historic Thousands on Jones St. People's Assembly Coalition. This coalition, under the banner of the "Forward Together Moral Movement," worked out of these established relationships, including significant church involvement, to organize the 13 Raleigh Moral Mondays and more than 25 local Moral Mondays statewide last year. The model seems to be spreading, with groups in Tennessee, Georgia, and South Carolina staging similar protests.

Above, Rev. William Barber, center, leads "Moral Monday" demonstrators at the state General Assembly in Raleigh, N.C., last July.

This movement has its work cut out for it—the voter suppression package that the North Carolina legislature passed last year is considered to be one of the harshest in the country. (The U.S. Justice Department has sued the state over the new law.) Lawmakers also cut the earned-income tax credit for 900,000 North Carolinians, cut tax rates for top earners while raising taxes on the bottom 95 percent, rejected Medicaid expansion, cut pre-K for 30,000 kids, have undermined environmental protection enforcement, and made it harder to challenge death sentences even if racial bias in a trial could be proved.

But the Moral movement is gearing up for 2014 and beyond—hoping to place young organizers in counties across North Carolina to engage in voter mobilization and education as part of "Freedom Summer 2014," challenging the voting restrictions in court, and planning more opportunities for peaceful resistance. —The Editors

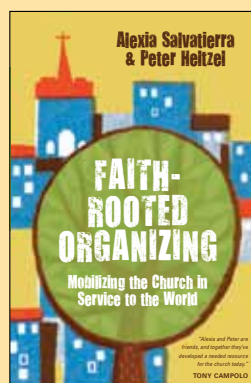
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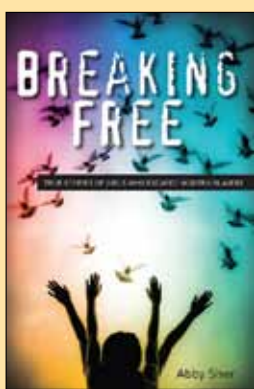
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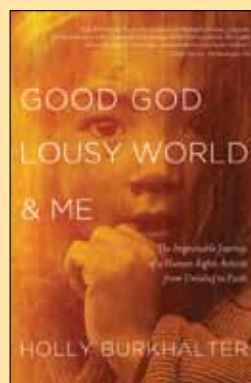


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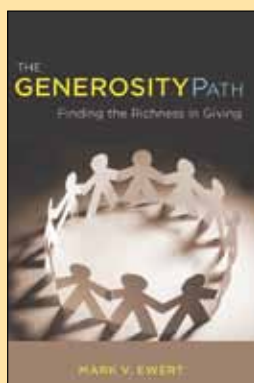
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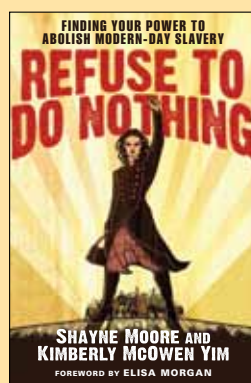
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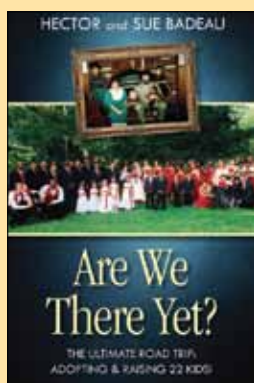
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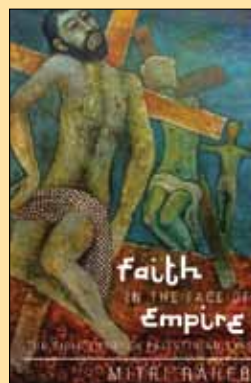
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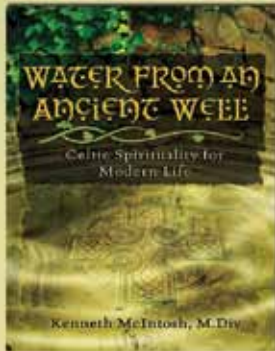
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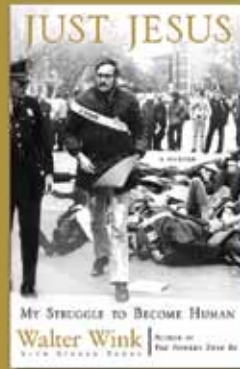


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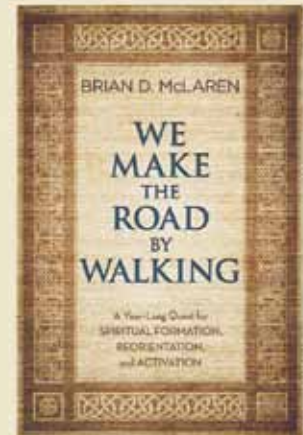
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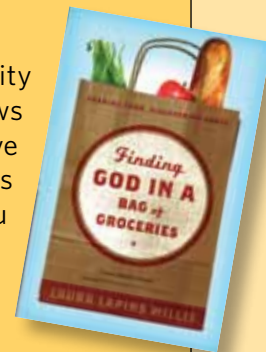
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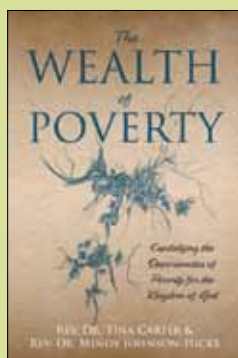
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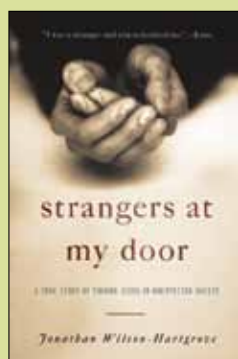
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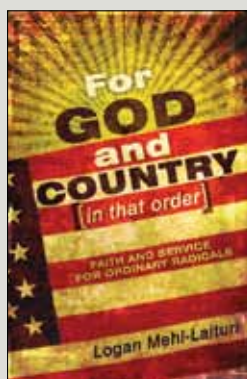


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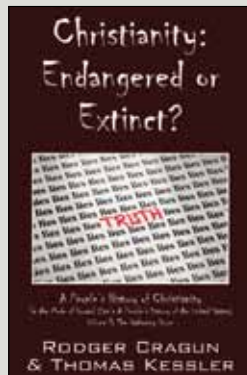
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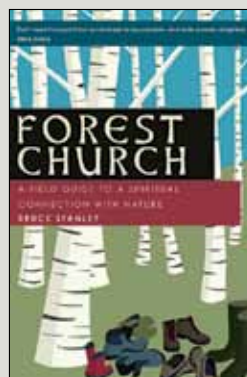


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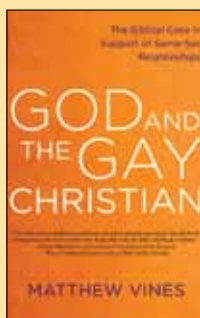
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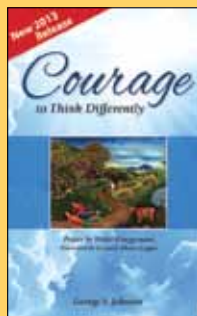
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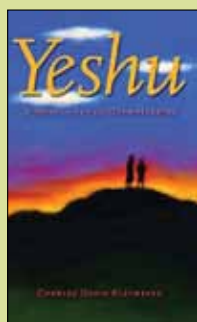
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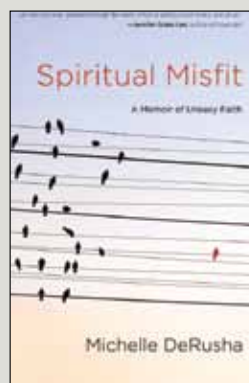


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HOLDING ON AND LETTING GO

**In a death-denying culture, how do we
learn to accompany the dying and the grieving?**

I WAS PRESENT when my uncle died. I didn't plan to be, but once I understood his end was near it felt right. I had been the flower girl at my aunt and uncle's wedding, the ritualized beginning of their life together, so witnessing this milestone event of my uncle's death seemed appropriate. And I wanted to support my aunt, I told myself.

My aunt is my father's youngest sister. They are the last living siblings from nine brothers and sisters; both their parents are also long gone. My aunt wears this fact like a veil. Sometimes it's barely noticeable; sometimes it's the only thing she sees. While my parents' divorce had kept me apart from my aunt for much of my life, it seemed important, the fury of those old family dramas now covered with dust, to offer my aunt support in her husband's last days, hours, then moments. She was hardly alone. My aunt has three grown daughters, and my uncle comes from a huge family, most of whom were packed into the hospital room where he died at 2:20 p.m. on Sept. 22, 2013.

My aunt told me she was happy to have me, a representative from her side of her family, present. So I was there. For her, I said.

**"When considering
the end of life, we have
to learn to say, 'I am
not my body.'"**

Getty Images



But to tell the truth, I was there to learn. I have plenty of information about the beginning of life. People in my generation received hours of tutoring, lecturing, indoctrinating, and warning about puberty, childbirth, birth control, and “safe sex.” Although we were actually not given much information about sexuality—I had to learn that on my own. But I knew even less about death.

In those days during my uncle’s passing, I felt the need to understand what some call the great mystery, the last journey, the final frontier. When my uncle died, would there be a bright light, a cold shudder in the room? Would time stop? Speed up? Would angels descend on clouds of harp music? Would there be someone or something to lead him from his physical body when he passed? Where was he going? Was he ready?

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’ groundbreaking book *On Death and Dying* was released in 1969. But many in the West, even people of faith, still have a problem talking about death in a way that is not infused with fear. As Mirabai Starr writes in *Living Fully, Dying Well*, “In spite of significant advances in death and dying education since the 1970s, American society on the whole still seems to suffer from fear and denial about the reality of death. In a culture where the casualties of

our wars are invisible to the average citizen, where many of our elders are institutionalized, and where most of our ill pass away behind the closed doors of impersonal hospital rooms, we are becoming increasingly unfamiliar with one of the most natural and sacred functions of living: dying.”

I’ve been drawn to the subject not out of some morbid curiosity, but perhaps because I have a genetic memory of embracing death as a fact of life. I am Mexican by heritage, and in Mexico, and in other parts of Latin America, the approach to death is less shrouded in silence or smothered with horror.

“To the inhabitants of New York, Paris, or London, death is a word that is never uttered because it burns the lips,” writes Mexican author Octavio Paz. “The Mexican, on the other hand, frequents it, mocks it, caresses it, sleeps with it, entertains it; it is one of his favorite playthings and his most enduring love.”

I wasn’t interested in caressing, sleeping with, or entertaining death when, during my childhood, one of the kids in my Lincoln, Neb., neighborhood had discovered old family photos in the crawl space in his rented home. Among the photos were images from several generations earlier of stoic-looking people, dressed in pitch-black suits and

dresses, all arranged around a propped-up coffin, which held a corpse. We were stunned. The once-common tradition of bringing the dead into the home was one thing, but documenting it in what to us resembled a grammar school class photo, with the dead person as the organizing centerpiece, was almost too much to make sense of. We had so many questions that we dared not ask. Instinctively, we knew we were looking at something profane but also profound: the idea that the dead could share a place in the everyday and the ordinary. How did that change?

ALTHOUGH I WASN’T there to witness it, the first and most painful death I experienced was my grandmother’s. I was a young adult, many miles from home, attending the University of Texas at Austin. Her death wasn’t a surprise. I had a dream about my grandmother two days prior to her death. Though she didn’t explicitly say the words, the message was clear: She intended to die. Some have called my dream a “visitation,” others a “ghost story.” Still others are deeply troubled by my suggestion that this dream indicates to me that the membrane separating the living from the dead is much more porous than many would like to believe.

Death may ultimately be unknowable, but that doesn’t mean it must be frightening. I began praying to my grandmother after her death, and praying to others that I knew and adored who have died. I don’t pray to them in the way some pray to a deity, asking for miracles. I pray for solace. I pray for guidance. I pray to find the words when I feel speechless. I pray to make choices that will make me worthy of being one of theirs.

“We need to see what is lovely in what the world has declared ugly or loathsome,” Debbie Blue writes in her thoughtful book *Consider the Birds*. In this case, she’s specifically speaking of the vulture, the animal given the most thankless task of cleansing the world, of clearing away the debris of the dead.

“We are all going to die, whether old or young,” Blue continues. “But what if we weren’t smothered and dimmed and made mean by our fear? What if we could be attentive ... and not be overcome with our assumptions about the goodness or badness, beauty or ugliness. ... We need to have

a little more imagination. The well-being of our children depends on this.”

AFTER MY FATHER was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease, he declined rapidly. He spent some time in a care facility but was eventually moved back home when a health crisis convinced everyone he was nearing the end of his life. I’ve dwelled in that emotional storm, raw with pain and anguish, hoping for

I have a mental organism. I have an affective organism; only the physical organism is being discarded at this point. I am not dying just because I am giving up my body.’ The sooner you can make that distinction, the better.”

But making that distinction is easier said than done. So much experience is carried in the body. Our sense memories delight and define us. It’s difficult to imagine an existence

The membrane separating the living from the dead is much more porous than many would like to believe.

a peaceful passage while also terrified at the thought of letting my father go. That was five years ago. So far, he’s lived far beyond everyone’s expectations.

Still, the illness has left him bedridden, unable to speak, and absolutely dependent on others for his needs. In the meantime, many of my contemporaries’ parents and loved ones have died, and illness has stricken dear friends and colleagues. And while I’m happy my father has survived, I can’t help but wonder: What is he waiting for? My father was a robust and active man; to see him trapped in his body is sometimes too much to bear—until I am reminded that he is also a man of great imagination. A former painter and consummate storyteller, he is someone who could make games out of the silliest of circumstances. Though his coherent moments are drawing shorter and rarer these days, he maintains the ability to find pleasure in life—perhaps more so than many of the so-called able-bodied among us who can be far less attuned to our spiritual selves, our imaginative selves.

“We must die to the flesh, in a sense, in order to experience more of the life of the spirit,” observes Edward W. Bastian, referring to a Sufi concept, in a conversation with Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi included in *Living Fully, Dying Well*. Schachter-Shalomi responds that the Sufis are not suggesting a “killing of the body” but rather overcoming the idea “that we are *only* a body of flesh.” (Italics are mine.) “When considering the end of life,” Schachter-Shalomi continues, “we have to learn to say, ‘I am not my body. This body is worn out, but I have other organisms. I have a spiritual organism.

beyond caresses, the joy invoked by a loved one’s laughter, the way that the taste of a certain food can take you back to your mother’s kitchen or the scent from a lover’s garment can make you swoon.

MY AUNT TELLS me she needs to clear my uncle’s things but cannot bring herself to do it. Not yet. She’s not ready. I offer to help. Her children offer to help. She wants to wait for spring, for warmer weather. That makes sense, we tell her. She apologizes for being so teary and needy between 4 p.m. and 7 p.m. every day. She doesn’t know why, but that time of day is the toughest for her, a time when the anguish of missing my uncle is renewed. I know to make myself available if she calls and needs company.

At first, I was worried that I would say the wrong thing or not say enough or say too much. I prayed to my grandmother to help me find the right words. I eventually understood that my job is to listen, offer a hug, or share a quiet meal.

I asked my aunt if she can feel my uncle’s presence. She wasn’t put off by the question. Instead, she seemed encouraged to contemplate something beyond the present emotional pain.

“Yes,” she said, a wan happiness peeking through the dreary light of mourning. “Sometimes I sense him.” ■

Belinda Acosta is the author of two novels as well as nonfiction pieces that have appeared on NPR’s Latino USA and in Poets & Writers Magazine, The Texas Observer, and elsewhere. She is in the Ph.D. program in creative writing at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln.



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A makeshift memorial in Southeast Washington, D.C., for 2-year-old Zion Destiny Walker, who was killed by her mother's boyfriend.

By Brittany Shoot

'WE WILL NEVER FORGET **YOU**'

Public memorials, both ad hoc and formal, speak to what divides us—and what brings us together.

ANYTIME A PUBLIC figure dies, there are spontaneous vigils, piles of flowers and stuffed toys heaped at the star's home or in a town square. But these outpourings of public grief aren't reserved only for the rich and famous. In communities across the country, everyday people hold vigils when a child is abducted or a family murdered in a senselessly random act of violence. Sometimes a prayer is murmured. Often, it's an opportunity for neighbors to mourn their shared loss.

Getting the message right in public grieving and memorializing hardly demands immense wealth or high-minded, thoughtful analysis. I'm heartened by impromptu candlelight vigils in the rain and messy memorials, because grief isn't organized or tidy. On vacation in Hawaii last summer, boogie boards jammed in the sand

Photos by Lloyd Wolf



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Robert Hirschfield on the life of poet Denise Levertov

reminded of our mortality and how loss—or even just the threat of impermanence—permeates most of our lives.

Where I live, in San Francisco, there have been several high-profile memorials this year for homeless people who passed away. San Francisco has a high rate of homelessness, an epidemic happening concurrent with the latest technology boom and its result-

Local advocates faced uphill battles as they worked to commemorate people who are routinely pushed to the fringes and forgotten.

ing regional wealth. It isn't uncommon in zip codes like my own, with staggering median incomes, to see people sleeping sprawled on the sidewalks or tucked under the eaves of a designer boutique. We are extreme examples of the haves and the have-nots. We live, often literally, side by side. And despite this ever-widening gap, when one of us is no longer there, we notice.

Spontaneous shrines raise awareness, but when you're honoring a group of people routinely ignored, you can always do more. St. Anthony's, one of the churches in town known for its robust daily-free-meals program, hosts an interfaith memorial every December solstice, which is also National Homeless Person's Memorial Day. The candlelight vigil and short readings honor homeless people who passed away the previous year in San Francisco. That number tends to be above 100. Next year, I'll light a candle for Mark, a man I fed for a year before he vanished from my block. There's someone new in his place, and I feed him, too. There's no marker for Mark, no visible sign he was ever there.

Loss is like that. It tends to be invisible, only haunting those who know the significance of a particular street corner. Individual expressions of grief tend to be tucked away; those that aren't shock others the same way we sometimes shock ourselves by weeping in public or being overcome by

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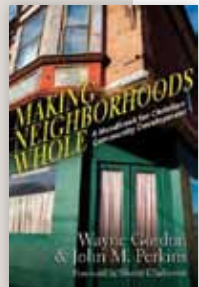
New & Noteworthy

EVERYDAY SAINTS

St. Peter's B-List: Contemporary Poems Inspired by the Saints, edited by Mary Ann B. Miller, is not a collection of sentimental greeting-card-style verses; instead these literary works wrestle deeply with the human condition and the yearning for holiness, sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit. Ave Maria Press

CITY MISSIONS

For nearly 30 years the Christian Community Development Association has been a resource for people seeking to do prophetic, non-paternalistic urban ministry. In *Making Neighborhoods Whole: A Handbook for Christian Community Development*, CCDA co-founders Wayne Gordon and John Perkins, and other veteran and emerging leaders, revisit key principles and lessons learned. IVP Books

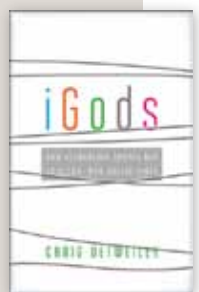


A NARRATIVE ARK

Noah's Flood: Ancient Stories of Natural Cataclysm is a new website with essays, visual media, and conversation on Genesis, other ancient flood narratives, and the resonance of Noah's story in contemporary culture and climate change. It was started by Ingrid Esther Lilly, a Pacific School of Religion visiting scholar. www.floodof-noah.com

GOD AND OUR DEVICES

Author, filmmaker, and cultural commentator Craig Detweiler explores the gifts and curses of our social media frenzy and teched-out society from a Christian perspective in *iGods: How Technology Shapes Our Spiritual and Social Lives*. Brazos Press



as makeshift headstones seemed to line the Big Island's Puna Coast, glittering stones and leis assembled at the base of each monument. "Sail away," one paddleboard inscription read. Beside it, a laminated sheet of photos was tacked to a palm tree. On some of the more menacing lava rock cliffs, where it was clear more than a few had perished trying to catch a deadly wave, entire burial grounds with a dozen granite headstones were lined up, matching benches facing the row of markers.

While those cenotaphs, like the white crosses along desert highways and at urban intersections, could be troubling (so much sadness out in the open), we become more empathetic when we're forced to slow down,

Sweet Soul Paradox

ON THE 2001 album *Southern Rock Opera*, over a thumping four-by-four beat and three roaring guitars, Drive-By Truckers front man Patterson Hood sang a song about “the duality of the Southern thing,” which he identified as equal parts “glory” and “shame.”

That pretty much sums up the paradox of a place like Hood’s native Alabama, where they celebrate the birthdays of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert E. Lee on the same day. But up in the northwest corner of Alabama there stands a monument to the South’s unalloyed glory—the FAME recording studio in Muscle Shoals.

Beginning in the late 1950s, when segregation was still the law throughout the former Confederacy, at FAME black and white Southerners worked as partners, side by side, to make the sweet soul music that would help change the world. Percy Sledge’s “When a Man Loves a Woman,” Aretha Franklin’s “I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You,” Wilson Pickett’s “Land of 1,000



FAME studio founder Rick Hall, left, with artist Clarence Carter, at the piano.

Ear Goggles Productions

The glory of the FAME studio had its roots in the deep shame of rural Southern poverty.

Dances” and “Mustang Sally”—they were all recorded in Muscle Shoals within a two-year period in the mid-1960s.

And most of the musicians on all those deeply funky recordings were white Alabamans. The bass player, David Hood, was the father of the Truckers’ Patterson Hood.

That’s the story told in Greg “Freddy” Camalier’s film *Muscle Shoals*, premiering on the PBS series “Independent Lens” on April 21. The film features FAME founder Rick Hall, the FAME rhythm section of Roger Hawkins, Barry Beckett,

Jimmy Johnson, and Hood (the boys Lynyrd Skynyrd dubbed “The Swampers”), and some of the artists who came to work with them—Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett, Percy Sledge, Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, and others. Musicians of more recent vintage testify to the abiding influence of the Muscle Shoals sound—such as Bono, Alicia Keys, and John Paul White, a local boy who found fame with The Civil Wars. And it’s all shot against the backdrop of the Muscle Shoals area’s wooded hills, lowland cotton fields, and, most of all, the magnificent Tennessee River upon which the life of the region still depends.

As Camalier’s telling of the story makes plain, the glory of FAME had its roots in the deep shame of rural Southern poverty. Rick Hall grew up in northwest Alabama’s Freedom Hills, the southernmost outpost of Appalachia (and of hill country opposition to the Confederate cause), sleeping on a straw mattress in a house with a dirt floor. “We just kind of grew up like animals,” he says in the film. “It made me bitter and driven.”

Hall’s life story is one of unrelenting tragedy. After his 4-year-old brother was

accidentally scalded to death, Hall’s mother abandoned the family and took up a life of prostitution. This left a psychic wound that Hall admits has never healed. In 1955, an oncoming car forced Hall off a local highway. The car flipped and his young bride died. Two weeks later Hall’s father died when he was trapped beneath the tractor his son had recently bought him. But out of all this came both Hall’s drive to “be somebody” and a deep, uncanny ability to empathize with the African-American artists he recorded.

As the film recounts, in 1969 The Swampers left FAME and started a rival studio. But Hall hired a new biracial staff and carried on. After that, little Muscle Shoals (population then 8,000) was home to two wildly successful international recording centers. At the end of Camalier’s film, Rick Hall and The Swampers are reunited, at FAME, to cut a session with Alicia Keys.

It’s an appropriate ending since reconciliation was always what the Muscle Shoals sound was all about. ■

Danny Duncan Collum teaches writing at Kentucky State University. He is the author of the novel *White Boy*.



Continued from Page 39

the smallest gesture. Collectively, we're all allowed to mourn within a predetermined window of time, in a designated place, such as a cemetery. Putting flowers on a tombstone doesn't disrupt the natural order of a day, except maybe for a groundskeeper intent on mowing the grass near a particular plot.

If you live in a city with a high percentage of bike commuters, you've probably seen eerily white bicycles placed where motorists struck cyclists. Ghost bikes began appearing 11 years ago in New York City. Shortly thereafter, an activist named Chris Phelan launched the first of many annual Rides of Silence, a somber, Critical Mass-style procession to honor those who have died, as well as cyclists who were injured but survived. These types of active memorials tend to have an obvious and necessary advocacy component. In this case, greater awareness about bicycle-related fatalities could lead to increased attention paid by motorists, and remind cyclists to ride safely.

In 2013, to mark the 10th anniversary of the first Ride of Silence, there were 372 Rides of Silence in all 50 States and in 26 countries. The next worldwide Ride of Silence (rideofsilence.org) is slated for May 21. The organized group rides are slow, no more than 12 miles per hour. It's appropriate. Grief isn't quick. By contrast, death is often far too rapid, like a thief in the night.

Lack of a sanctioned memorial can also cause distress. Years after the Green River Killer murdered at least four dozen Seattle-area women, many of them alleged sex workers, the victims' families are still fighting for the right to a public memorial. Sex work mirrors the way we treat grief: something to be ignored in hopes it might go away. Seattleites already fought hard for a memorial honoring their city's deceased homeless residents, which was erected in 2012 in a city park. In both cases, local advocates faced uphill battles as they worked to commemorate people who are routinely pushed to the fringes and sometimes intentionally forgotten.

When I talk to friends about memorials, ego inevitably comes up. Some of us immediately launch into debating whether we'd want to be memorialized, to have flowers put on a street corner by our loved ones.

The *Great Beauty* was first released in independent art house theaters in the U.K.



IF I WERE A RICH MAN

BEST-SELLING WRITER James Patterson recently established a million-dollar fund to support independent bookstores amid the current publishing industry crisis. Patterson is showing both generosity of spirit and humility before the audience that made him rich, not to mention an ethical commitment to the community-building impact and personal pleasures of smaller bookshops.

I think his open-minded and visionary idea should be translated to independent theaters too. The experience of entering shopping mall multiplexes to be seated in a shoebox and watch 25 minutes of advertisements before the same film that's screening at every other multiplex does not resonate with the poetics of the art. And I mean that literally—beautiful cinema does not belong in an ugly industrial container. I mean “belong” literally too—if art is about belonging, about the idea of finding a home for our idea of ourselves, then it would make more sense to screen movies in environments that invite a sense of home, not evoke battery farms.

If James Patterson were to set up another million-dollar fund devoted to independent movie theaters, I'd be happy to help him spend it. I'd upgrade projection, audio, and lighting so that as much attention can be paid to how a film looks as to how paintings are hung in a gallery or music played in a concert. I'd make the seats comfortable for average-sized human

beings. I'd give grants to community groups who want to refurbish their dilapidated downtown theater as a venue for the common good. I'd screen films that invite social change. I'd develop new distribution networks that challenge the dominance of the military-industrial-entertainment complex—offering the rights to screen films in exchange for an ethical fee or a gift in-kind. I'd have potlucks at 5:30 p.m. and movies at 6:30 p.m. so there's enough time afterward to write poetry together or march on the capitol.

I'd make the experience of cinema interactive rather than transactional: Watch *Jaws* and discuss our role in the destruction of the marine ecosystem; see *Jesus of Montreal* and invite meditation on what a life incarnating love would look like if you were letting it live through you; let *The Great Beauty* lead to a conversation about where we can't see the beautiful wood for the trees; give a couple of hours to *Singin' in the Rain* and let's dance!

James Patterson has pioneered something beautiful in the world of books and will be remembered for it. I wonder if there's anyone out there who has made enough money from the movies to do the same for independent theaters? ■

Gareth Higgins is a northern Irish writer based in North Carolina. His book Cinematic States: America in 50 Movies is available from www.cinematicstates.com.

Others of us talk about what it would be like to create and maintain the public altar, our grieving forced upon strangers, a ritual we'd hope could sustain our need for a protracted, sorrowful practice.

In these conversations, ritualizing and memorializing is typically not about answering the age-old question of what would Jesus do. Instead, our concerns center on what we would do. We don't think about advocacy, because we don't plan for senseless tragedy or premature loss. Instead, we talk about what we'd hope would be done in our names, because most of us are privileged enough to never have to make that call, never have to silently march to a spot to tearfully place a marker, never have to figure out whether and how to force fellow citizens to confront the

public nature of grief.

Across our spectrum of disparate beliefs, we agree that rituals have meaning. The older we get, the closer we move toward losing parents and grandparents (if we haven't already). Many of us have settled into partnerships we hope will last until our deaths in old age, friendships we hope will sustain us until we've grown apart or moved into the next unpredictable phase of our lives. Few can conceive of the horror that is burying a child. We occasionally lose our pets and agree that the recovery process can seem to last as long as any related to a human death.

When a loved one dies after an extended illness, many mourn the absence while learning to fill the time. Rituals we create after a sudden tragedy or a protracted period of unknowing fill a different sort of void, a wound ripped open suddenly rather than one we've learned to tend to over time.

Every method has purpose: laying flowers on a marker, spray-painting old bikes, or raising money for a memorial to honor the most overlooked and forgotten among us. If we agree that life has meaning, we can agree that its loss is deeply profound, an emptiness we all share in the course of being humans who care about one another. How we choose to cope and support one another in our individual struggles is just one more opportunity to be our most compassionate selves. ■

Brittany Shoot is a Sojourners contributing writer.

At left, a memorial to Ruthanne Lodato, a music teacher in Alexandria, Va., gunned down in her doorway by an unknown assailant.



Reviewed by Duane Shank

THE PRICE OF CONSCIENCE

Pacifists in Chains: The Persecution of Hutterites During the Great War, by Duane C.S. Stoltzfus. Johns Hopkins University Press.

AS THE U.S. mobilized for World War I, a wave of patriotic fervor and xenophobia swept the country. Anything German was suspect, and those who were German-speaking and refused to fight against Germany were doubly suspect. Resentment and anger were directed at Anabaptist groups; several churches were burned and pastors beaten.

Inevitably, the demands of the state conflicted with the rights of conscience. Christian pacifists who only desired to be true to their beliefs by not serving in the military faced a militarized state that saw them as disloyal and disobedient. There was no legally recognized right to conscientious objection—if drafted, the only alternative for objectors was to go into the military and then refuse to participate.

Hutterite leaders had agreed that their young men would register, but if drafted and required to report for military service, their cooperation would end. They would refuse any orders making them complicit in war. *Pacifists in Chains* is the story of four young men—David, Michael, and Joseph Hofer, and Jacob Wipf—from the Hutterite colony in Alexandria, S.D., who faced that choice. Duane C.S. Stoltzfus, a professor at Goshen College in Indiana, was given access to previously unpublished letters from these men to their wives and families; the book is built around those letters.

Upon being drafted, the four reported in May 1918 and were sent to Fort Lewis, Wash. When they arrived, they immediately faced the test. Ordered to sign an “enlistment and assignment card” and line up as soldiers, they refused and were taken to the guardhouse. Following a brief court-martial, they were found guilty and sentenced to 20 years. Two weeks later, they were in chains and with armed guards on a train headed south to Alcatraz prison in the San Francisco Bay, then a military “disciplinary

barracks.” Once there, they again refused to put on the uniform—in this case a military prison one—and were placed in solitary confinement in “the hole,” a basement dungeon. The cells seeped water and were infested with rats; the men were given bread and water to eat and subjected to beatings.

After four months, they were transported to Ft. Leavenworth, Kan., again in chains. Likely already sick, in his last letter to his wife, written from the transport train, Joseph wrote: “My dear wife, since we will no longer see each other in this troubled world, then

In several Anabaptist communities, churches were burned.

we will see each other yonder through the power of God. With this we must be satisfied with that which God allows to happen.”

Upon arrival, Joseph and Michael complained of chest pains and were taken to the hospital. A week later, Joseph died, followed in a few days by Michael. The official cause of death was given as pneumonia—the common designation for the “Spanish” influenza (part of the global flu pandemic of 1918-20) that was then raging in the prison and to which their weakened condition from mistreatment made them more susceptible. David Hofer was released to accompany his brothers’ bodies home. Jacob Wipf was finally released the following April.

Stoltzfus places this story in its context—the national xenophobia in wartime, the attacks on peace churches, the Army draft and buildup, the history and operations of Alcatraz prison, and efforts by church leaders to secure exemption from military service for conscientious objectors. The book is grounded in detailed research and well-crafted writing, making it an informative history of the World War I era. And the story comes to life in the men’s letters to their wives and families back in South Dakota. They only allude to the sufferings they were enduring but are firm in their trust in God.

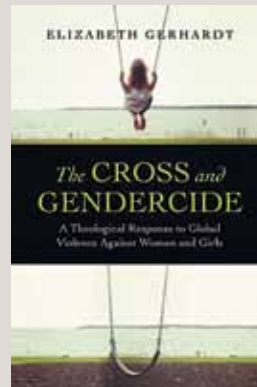
In the U.S. today, claims of violations of religious liberty can often seem trivial compared to the life-and-death matters in other countries. *Pacifists in Chains* reminds us that we have experienced similar stakes in our

Excerpt by Elizabeth Gerhardt

NOT A ‘WOMEN’S ISSUE’

THE CULTURAL explanations and defenses for women undergoing genital mutilation, female infanticide, domestic violence, and other atrocities crumble under the weight of the cross. The involuntary suffering endured by millions of women is not redemptive; it is a suffering borne out of opposition to a God that desires to crush such

bondage. An orientation of the cross emphasizes the importance of maintaining a precise language for a Christian perspective and application. According to Gerhard Forde, our modern culture has been so sensitized and psychologized that we are afraid to call a spade a spade. We often act many times “on the assumption that our language must constantly



integrity and humanity of God’s creation. The work of Christ on the cross demands that the whole of the church respond to the ongoing evil and sin at work in the world. The power of God can be expressed through this language of the cross.

A theology of the cross insists on the proclamation of the gospel as the primary focus of the church. The

work to end injustice is necessary, but it is not the primary work of the church. Faith and works cannot be separated, but neither should they be collapsed. There are social, economic, and political realities that obstruct belief and are destructive to the integrity of humanity. The church is required to draw boundaries and declare those acts to be sinful and wrong, work

By using the language of the cross, the church embraces the gravity of violence against women and girls.

be trimmed so as not to give offense, to stroke the psyche rather than to place it under attack.” Our language can ultimately decline to a type of “greeting-card sentimentality.” Forde claims that when this happens we have lost our theological courage and legitimacy. A theology of the cross provides a paradigm or conceptual framework for a language that always speaks truth to power.

The language and meaning of the cross provide the most relevant and useful foundation for creating a practical social ethic for the work of ending violence against women and girls by identifying oppression, abuse, and violence as sin, and by providing a direction and necessary focus for the church. By using the language of the cross, the church embraces the gravity of violence against women and girls. It is not a “women’s issue” or merely another “social problem.” It is sin that violates the

to obstruct those acts, and then act in a positive manner to provide the resources for a new order.

This aspect of the *theologia crucis*, the language of proclamation, is particularly significant for a church response to gendercide because it provides the starting point for the work. It shapes our orientation to God and others within our own historical and social context. From the perspective of the cross, violence against women is exposed as sin that divides humankind, violates the dignity of God’s creation, abuses power, and obstructs the gospel message of salvation and freedom. ■

Taken from The Cross and Gendercide: A Theological Response to Global Violence Against Women and Girls, by Elizabeth Gerhardt. Copyright (c) 2014 by Elizabeth Gerhardt. Used by permission of InterVarsity Press, www.ivpress.com.

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own history. Joseph and Michael Hofer are among that great cloud of witnesses who gave their lives in order to follow the Prince of Peace. They now lay under grave markers inscribed with their names, dates of birth and death, and the single word "Martyr." ■

Duane Shank is an associate editor of Sojourners. Motivated by his Anabaptist beliefs, he was a draft resister during the Vietnam War.

Reviewed by Robert Hirschfield

PROTEST AND PRAISE

Denise Levertov: A Poet's Life, by Dana Greene. University of Illinois Press.

A Poet's Revolution: The Life of Denise Levertov, by Donna Krolik Hollenberg. University of California Press.

IT IS FITTING that *The Collected Poems of Denise Levertov* (New Directions) begins with "Listening to Distant Guns," written in 1940, when the poet was just 17: "The low pulsation in the east is war."



The subject of war and its horrors, a constant in Levertov's poetry and in her life, surfaces for the final time at the very end of this big book with these lines, written in 1997, from the poem "Thinking About Paul Celan": You / at last could endure / no more. But we / live and live, / blithe in a world / where children kill children.

Denise Levertov (1923-1997), an American poet born in Ilford, England, to a Christian-Jewish father who was a descendant of Rabbi Schneur Zalman, founder of Chabad Hasidism, and a Welsh-Christian mother, herself the descendant of the Christian mystic Angell Jones of Mold, began to see her spiritual sensibility take a more formal religious shape only in her late 50s, when she opened to the liturgical, mystical, and social justice dimensions of Christianity, especially Catholicism, to which she later converted.

Two recent biographies, Dana Greene's *Denise Levertov: A Poet's Life* and Donna Krolik Hollenberg's *A Poet's Revolution: The Life of Denise Levertov*, explore deeply, albeit

with inevitable overlap, the serial passions and enduring poetics of this singular artist.

At age 11, both biographers tell us, Levertov was going door to door peddling *The Daily Worker* in Ilford. At 12, she sent a batch of her poems to T.S. Eliot, and received back from him an encouraging response.

Poetry was her life's purest passion. She had many lovers, many headlong, hurtful affairs to compensate for her romantically derailed and failed marriage to writer-activist Mitch Goodman. She also had a troubled relationship with their son, Nikolai, to whom *Collected Poems* is dedicated.

Levertov's own activism contributed to the rupture with her principal mentor, the poet Robert Duncan, who like many of her other admirers was critical of the strident tone of the anti-Vietnam War poems in her book *To Stay Alive*. Duncan, himself a pacifist, maintained that her anger was damaging to her imagery as well as her poetic integrity.

Levertov was one of the finest lyrical poets of her time. She wrote deeply seen nature poems, contemplative poems, poems that wove together persona and nature.

"Settling," from *Evening Train*, one of her final volumes, begins with these lines:

*I was welcomed here—clear gold
of late summer, of opening autumn,
the dawn eagle sunning himself on the
highest tree.*

The poet was 25 and newly married when she first set foot in the United States. A foreign voice in a foreign land, she admired but refused to emulate in her work the idiomatic American voice of another of her mentors, William Carlos Williams. She insisted "that the poet's first obligation was to [his or her] own voice—to find it and to use it." She also once said, "I think I was able to become an American because I wasn't really anything. I was many things and no one thing."

Her fierce individualism (in this she was very much her father's daughter) invited controversy. When radical feminism erupted in the '60s, prominent female poets such as Adrienne Rich and Muriel Rukeyser embraced it. Levertov did not. Though disdainful of sexism, she was likewise disdainful of self-absorbed feminist politics and gender poetics ("I feel that the Arts always have transcended and must transcend gender").



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Short Takes

FOUR QUESTIONS FOR...



Tyrone Parker, top row in red, with Alliance of Concerned Men participants.

Tyrone Parker

Bio: Tyrone Parker is the executive director of Alliance of Concerned Men (ACM), a nonprofit that works with youth living in high-crime areas in Washington, D.C.

Website: allianceofconcernedmen.com

1 What event or episode in your life has most informed your passion for working with urban youth and families? One was the loss of my son, Rodney [who was killed in 1989]. The other was the record number of homicides within the District of Columbia. The District was once considered the “murder capital” of the United States.

When we first got started with the intervention program, it was due to a 12-year-old kid who was shot in the nation’s capital on the day of the Clinton inauguration. If you would’ve gone 10 minutes on East Capitol Street, you would’ve seen the inauguration with a major celebration. And 10 minutes down the same street, you had a whole community under house arrest. After that, we came together as a group to form the Alliance of Concerned Men.

2 What sorts of services and programs does ACM provide?

We teach a number of skills to at-risk youth, including gang intervention/prevention and mediation, workforce development, life skills training, leadership development, coaching for re-entry, and youth gang conflict resolution.

3 Can you describe your vision for a “murder free D.C.”? I imagine communities of youth where the key is that they don’t believe they will die before the age of 18. It offers so much to the city as a whole to give the youth the opportunity to say, “I will get to age 21.” They can begin to invest within themselves and consequently in their family and community. That’s one of the principle factors—to begin to give hope to individuals who do not see hope.

4 What has most surprised you in your work? One of the most surprising aspects of my work has been that the youth are willing to put down their guns and transform their lives. They already have a vision of what they want to do; they just need someone to help get them there. When the youth see that they can have the opportunity to have a better tomorrow, when they see that people are reaching out to them, when they see programs are available, when they see support systems there—then that begins a transformation. ■

—Interview by Rebecca Kraybill

CultureWatch

BOOKS ART MUSIC FILM

Greene and Hollenberg are the harvesters of the poet’s rich contradictions. The Hollenberg biography is the more comprehensive of the two, but Greene puts Levertov’s spiritual life into stronger focus. The poet’s late-blossoming Christianity led her, in her 60s and 70s, to write some of the strongest contemporary religious poetry we have, which increasingly focused on the immanence of God.

The poem “St. Thomas Didymus,” in *A Door in the Hive*, says much about Levertov’s own view of her spiritual standing:

*I heard him cry out, weeping, and speak
those words,
Lord, I believe, help thou
mine unbelief,
and knew him
my twin ... ■*

Robert Hirschfield is a New York City-based freelance writer.



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Detail from "Croatia Revisited," by Leyla Murr (layla.imagekind.com)

Easter With Czeslaw Milosz: Cento

From white villages Easter bells resound.
Rejoice! Give thanks! I raise my voice
Evil disappears from the world.
And that means somewhere God must be.
So that for a short moment there is no death.
If only everything kept happening in such a way
And a garden of forgiveness gathered all of us
Who doubted the goodness of Creation.

Kathleen Gunton is a poet, fiction writer, and photographer in Orange, Calif. This cento is composed of lines from Czeslaw Milosz' New and Collected Poems: 1931-2001.

Telling a Resurrection Story

THERE IS NO controlling a story once it's out. Even in the times before cell phones, the internet, and Twitter, news traveled a similar route through participants, eyewitnesses, and those with the privilege to eavesdrop upon rumors and reports. Details get scattered, but the facts stand out. Many stories can be told about who, when, and how the story leaked. But all those specifics remain secondary to the spectacular announcement. For example, in 1903, how did *The Virginian-Pilot* scoop other newspapers to be the first to cover the beginning of the aviation age? No one really knows. Orville and Wilbur Wright believed their hometown Dayton newspapers should make the announcement. Indeed, on Dec. 18, the day after the first flight, the *Dayton Evening Herald* reported the news—directly based on a telegraph sent by Orville Wright. But three other papers had already reported this world-changing occasion based on *The Virginian-Pilot's* story. Though filled with inaccuracies, the original accounts correctly announced the single important fact: There had been a flight!

Two thousand years earlier, the witness of a few women called forth centuries of testimonies that describe a progression from lack of recognition to full recognition of Jesus the person, as well as the significance of his death and resurrection. The cross and the empty tomb are not self-explanatory; they require interpretation. On the other side of the Lenten journey, Easter provides opportunities for the church to reflect on the biblical witness concerning the rumors of the resurrection. These texts highlight not only the necessity of interpretation, but also the sources and shape of valid interpretation.



Joy J. Moore is associate dean for African-American church studies and assistant professor of preaching at Fuller Theological Seminary in California.

[MAY 4]

Preachers and Public Opinion

Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35

TODAY'S LISTENERS are no longer captivated by the 18th century refrain that we are "sinners in the hands of an angry God." Sound bites, status updates, and Tweets direct our attention to the latest news. But is Christian speech distinguishable amid the cacophony of public opinion? Reading Acts 2 behind the gospel text might tempt some to rekindle dogmatic assertions against a bankrupt society in order to numerically increase those who will build God's kingdom on earth.

We express with the psalmist such gratitude that we long to return to God what is worthy of the gift of salvation (116:12). More than just offering words of thanksgiving and exclamations of praise, this psalmist vows to be God's servant. But to save oneself from this "corrupt generation" (Acts 2:40) will lead to suffering if one's walk matches one's talk. The actions

of the gathered community in Acts raise the volume of Peter's indicting sermon. Understanding the context of 1 Peter helps make the meaning more clear.

In the Greco-Roman world, conformity takes precedence. To consider futile the inherited ways of one's ancestors (1

Our post-theistic context hungers for good without God, justice without Jesus, and rituals without religion.

Peter 1:18) is to choose against the culture. But the language in 1 Peter is not culture-negating. Peter addresses Christians whose allegiances, attitudes, and actions are so consistent with God's agenda they've become contempt-worthy misfits in the

larger society. Joel Green suggests the commitments of these Christians "place them on the fringes of their communities." It almost changes the tone of the Emmaus Road travelers questioning how Jesus could not know of the things that had happened that weekend—maybe the misplaced focus was theirs (Luke 24:18).

Fortunately, the contemporary church has shed some awkward conventions. Images no longer come to mind of a door-to-door peddler with the charm of a used-car dealer and a 50-pound leather Bible containing Puritan rules and one-sided opinions written in Shakespearean language. Recent efforts to rethink Christian speech take seriously the church's task in every era to understand the circumstances of this life through the death of Jesus and the proclamation of his resurrection. Still, the question remains: What would we be talking about if, without warning, Jesus joined our journey (Luke 24:17)?

[MAY 11]

Faith or Fiction?

Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

IN THE INTRODUCTION to Mark Labberton's *The Dangerous Act of Loving Your Neighbor*, he describes one stranger's response to the book title: "Is it a work of fiction?" Labberton pondered the question. After two millennia of Christian influence, and in the age of the Holocaust and Jim Crow segregation, the general public seems to have the impression that love of neighbor is indeed fiction. It is a sad commentary on our culture that hospitality continues to be awe-inspiring (Acts 2:43).

In Acts 2, Luke provides a transitional summary of events between Peter's two sermons. This description of the community's collaborative practices mirrors the individual message of the apostle. How does this read when attention is paid more to the invitation of the shepherd who prepares a table for us in the presence of our enemies (Psalm 23:5) than to calculating the bandit's

thievery (John 10:1)? What gives credibility to the testimony of Christians has always been practice more than preaching.

Righteous suffering undermines the claims of the ruling empire to its importance as the people of God choose to mediate God's presence in the midst of contrary cultural forces (1 Peter). To what end? Affirmed by the suffering servant rather than name-calling, taking up arms, or withdrawing from society, they walk through the darkest valleys of public streets, without the fear of evil (Psalm 23:4). Consequential numerical growth is most evident not in political bipartisan practices, but in congregations that are multiethnic and multicultural (Acts 2:7-12, 47).

The readings for this week provide opportunity to describe the global impact when Christian practices match those of the ancient people of God. Or possibly the opportunity to explore answers to Labberton's question: "Is it a work of fiction to talk about changing the human heart in order for the world to become more just?"

[MAY 18]

Speaking With Purpose

Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16;
1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

IN A CONTEXT where artificial intelligence, sleek electronic devices, and genetically engineered vegetables alter human experience of the "natural world," biblical references to an infant's natural desire for breast milk seem as archaic as the claim that we all desire spirituality. Our increasingly post-theistic context hungers for good without God, justice without Jesus, and rituals without religion. However, the purpose of Christian speech continues to be to subject our ideals to the reign of God. In Acts 7, Stephen does so for his first century audience who learn of him first by his works. When required to give words, Stephen is as knowledgeable in the history of the people of God as he is effective in the task he is hired to complete. When asked to explain himself, Stephen's stunning speech places him among the preachers, though he was chosen as a practitioner.

Like Stephen in his day, 21st century Christians must also be biblically literate in our context. We must learn again that those who bear witness to God's presence cannot only be preachers. Regardless of vocation, every believer should be fluent in how Jesus' death and resurrection figure into their practice in the world. And like the first century

Regardless of vocation, every believer should be fluent in how Jesus' death and resurrection figure into their practice in the world.

audiences, we must understand this might cost us our position, if not our life.

It's likely that the historical situation about which Peter is concerned in 1 Peter requires evoking continuity from Israel of old to the contemporary life of God's people. Foremost this letter favors a life embodying the character of a holy God and refusing conventions of ancestry and citizenship that constitute social status. Best demonstrated in the pattern of Jesus' life, such choices make one marginal in the larger society. Indeed, it cost Stephen his life (Acts 7:60). This suffering was purposeful, as Joel Green reminds us, "overcoming the powers of evil and effecting the transformation of persons from old and idolatrous ways of life, from wasting time feeding the insatiable desires of pagan life, to a life patterned after that of Christ, embodying the character of a holy God, demonstrating the possibility of faithful suffering."

[May 25]

Paul's Generous Orthodoxy

Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:8-20;
1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

POPULAR FICTION today conjures more fear than hope. From 1984 to 2012 (that would be the book and the movie), readers and viewers are introduced to societies characterized by squalor, oppression, and displacement. Such stories have essentially a single purpose—to warn us about the dangers of current cultural patterns. The authors

of dystopian narratives rely on illuminating how terrible things will become if our deplorable behavior continues unchecked.

The writers of the biblical narratives, however, are reluctant to depict hope as dependent merely on better human behavior. And so the lectionary provides a psalm reminder that our prayers have not been

rejected (Psalm 66:20), a gospel promise we are not left alone (John 14:16), and an epistle that separates present-day suffering from ultimate harm (1 Peter 3:13-14).

The infamous record of Paul's message to the Athenians (Acts 17:22-31) reveals Paul to be acutely familiar with the discourse that informed his contemporaries' imaginations. Despite his frustration, his argument about an "unknown god" (verse 23) reflects his generous orthodoxy, finding a place of honest commonality from which to make known the hope of the God revealed in the death of Jesus. Thus arises the instruction in 1 Peter 3:15-16 to "[a]lways be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you." Here, says Joel Green, resurrection is interpreted as "God's vindication of the righteous who have suffered unjustly and the decisive establishment of divine justice."

Possibly, our lack of familiarity with 1 Peter provides an opportunity to speak to the suffering society in need of an eschatological hope. Unlike our dystopian narratives, ancient Athenians were theists. Our post-theistic context requires deep familiarity with the stories that shape our societal imagination. Ours is an age of "content creation," and so it is necessary for us to speak our story well. If not, as Bobette Buster warns in her book *Do Story*, "then someone else will come in and wallpaper our culture with their stories." ■

"Preaching the Word," Sojourners' online resource for sermon preparation and Bible study, is available at sojo.net/ptw.

One Hump or Two?

RESEARCHERS from Tel Aviv University recently announced a discovery that could shake the foundations of biblically based history currently taught in most states below the Mason-Dixon line (otherwise known as “Jesus Country,” unless Jesus comes back without a photo ID).

Granted, biblical controversies may not be the most important thing to you right now, when you’re coming up with this year’s excuse why your new beach body won’t be ready by Memorial Day. But we should never shirk from scholarship that could deepen our faith or, short of that, allow us to use the phrase “camel bones” for the first time in our lives.

To wit: Using carbon-dating techniques to determine the age of the world’s oldest-known camel bones, researchers have determined



Ken Davis

because my faith was bolstered by something big enough to cover a good-sized twin bed! And with a picture of Jesus on it! (Much cooler than Justin Bieber or a Disney princess.)

I’ve never believed much in carbon dating since then. Speed dating, maybe. But not the other thing.

HOWEVER, it is science, and even if it’s not applicable in all states, let’s assume for the moment the camel thing is true, like the recent discovery of kryptonite on the periodic table. (It was on the lower right, so nobody noticed it.)

What this means is, yet again, biblical archaeology has trumped biblical history, and people who fail to learn the lessons of biblical archaeology are doomed to repeat it. And that’s a lot of syllables to repeat, much less type without spellcheck.

Ancient Egyptian merchants probably introduced camels around the 9th century BCE—hey, don’t ask me; I don’t know what the “E” stands for either—and just in time, too, otherwise the animal might not have figured in any of the iconic imagery of our faith. No camels to fit with difficulty through the eye of the needle. (Jesus: “Again I tell you, it is easier for a, uhm, okay, maybe that donkey cart over there to go through...”)

No moonlit silhouettes of the

three Wise Men following the star in the east. While it might have been more comfortable to make the journey in a Winnebago, they’d only need one, so there goes that image.

It’s odd that no camels appear in any of the nativity scenes commemorated in classic paintings or Cracker Barrel snow globes. The Wise Men probably tied up their camels outside the manger, where they were unable to do those nasty things camels would have done to spoil the touching scene. Camels, after all, never low. They spit, and might even have bitten the Little Drummer Boy on the way in.

It’s just as well that camels were never a part of the live nativity scenes of my youth. It’s hard to find a camel in rural Indiana. Actually, I have a vague memory of a llama showing up once, in the back, but my view was distracted by a donkey that kept braying in that way donkeys have of showing their prominent gumline in a most unalluring fashion. Nobody wants to see that. Not you. Not me. And certainly not the Baby Jesus who, in this instance, was a plastic doll of an undetermined gender and age. (Where are the scientists when you really need them?) ■

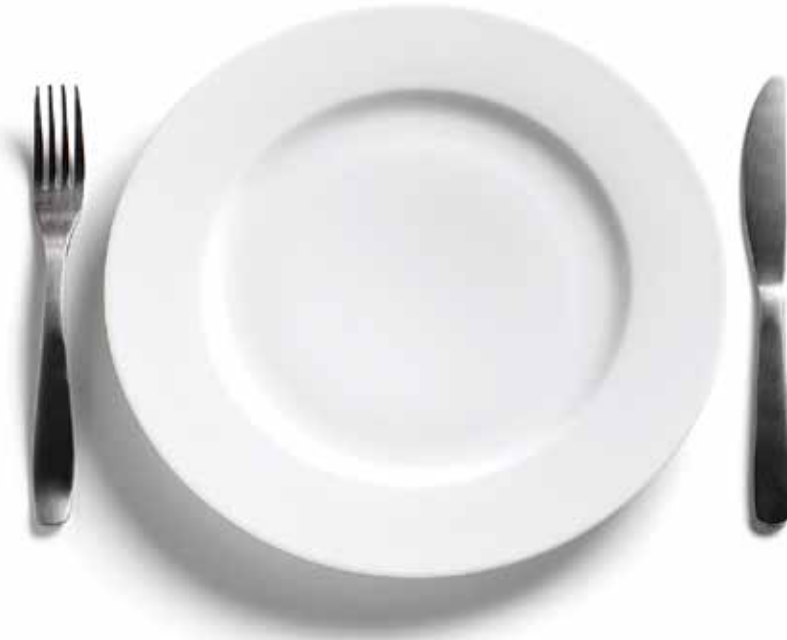
Ed Spivey Jr. is art director of Sojourners.

Another test of biblical authority by unscrupulous scientists.

that camels could not have been the pack animals referred to in much of the Old Testament. At that time, camels had not yet been introduced to the region. It’s not clear if camel introductions were something that just wasn’t done in polite company or if the dearth of camels was only alleviated by Egyptian merchants establishing Mediterranean trade routes. But the latter would be my guess and is, in fact, the conclusion of the Tel Aviv researchers.

And it’s good we see eye-to-eye with the scientists on this particular issue, since their method is one I hold in contempt. I took it personally when carbon dating was used to disprove that the Shroud of Turin displayed the real image of Jesus Christ. I believed in the Shroud. When preachers would sermonize on faith the size of a mustard seed, I would smile condescendingly,

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